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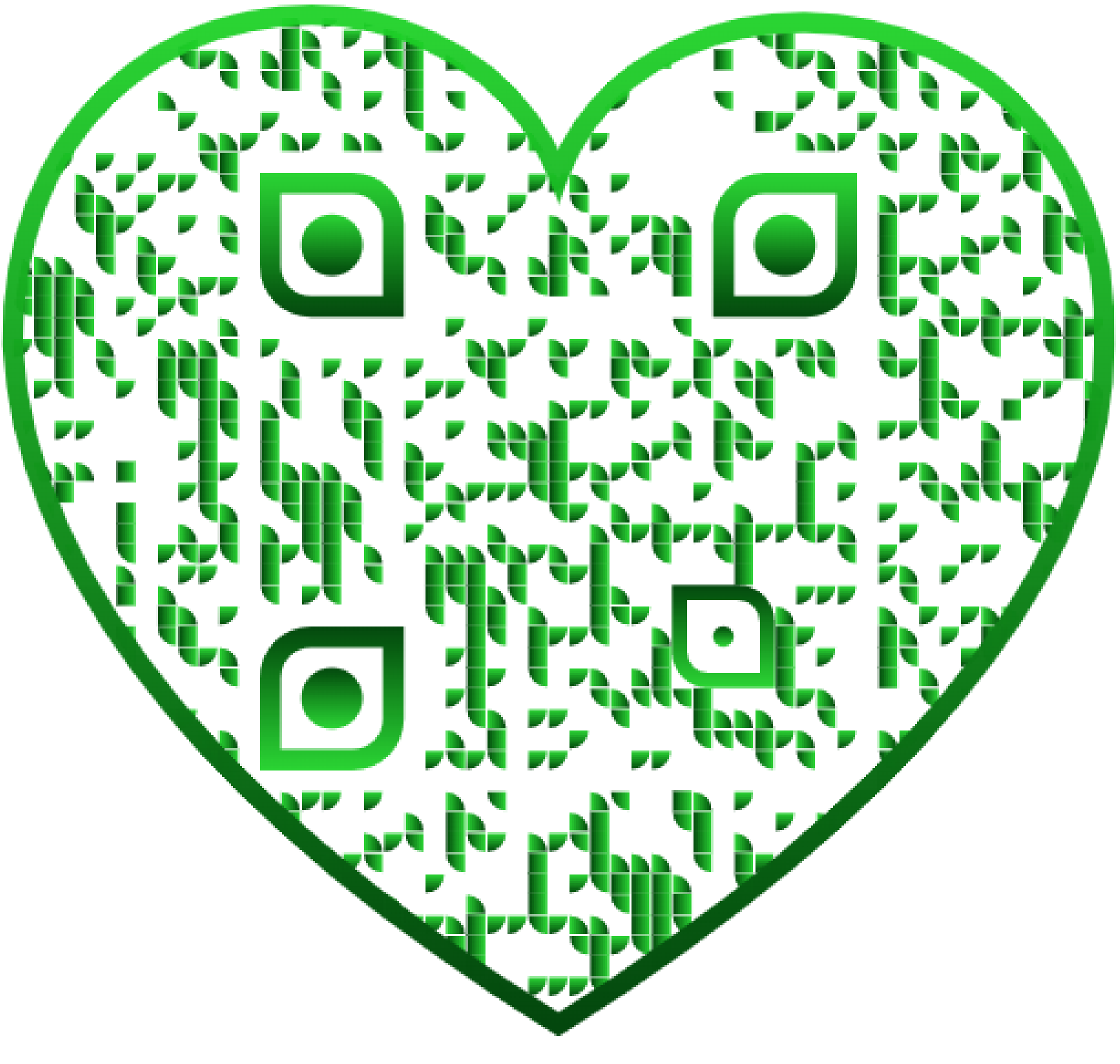

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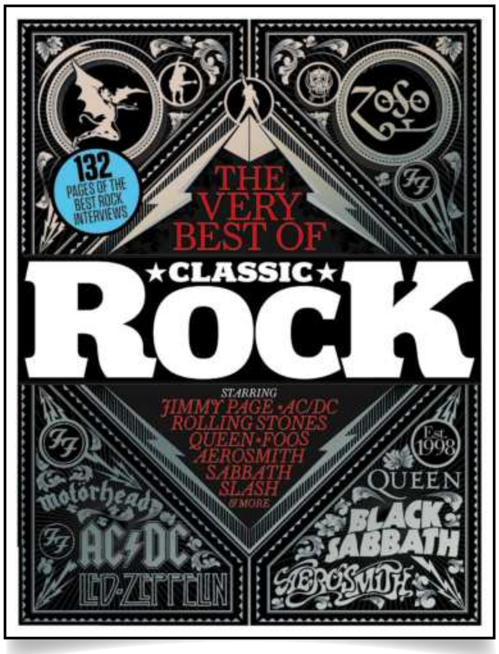

When *Classic Rock* magazine launched at the end of 1998, there were some who thought it wouldn't last 10 issues. "Who wants to read about a bunch of old bands with guitars anyway?" scoffed these naysayers.

A hell of a lot of people, it turns out. Almost 25 years later, *Classic Rock* is celebrating its 300th issue – an incredible landmark by anyone's measure. The list of bands and artists who have featured in the pages of the magazine reads like a Who's Who Of Rock'N'Roll – Led Zeppelin, AC/DC, Pink Floyd, the Rolling Stones, Queen, Black Sabbath, Aerosmith… in fact it's easier to list who *hasn't* appeared in the mag (spoiler: it's a very short list). And it's not just 'old' legends – *Classic Rock* has always recognised the importance of the new generation of guitar bands that have emerged in the last 25 years, as everyone from Alter Bridge and The Darkness to Rival Sons and The Struts can vouch.

This special commemorative magazine showcases the very best features and interviews from the first 300 issues of *Classic Rock*, from Jimmy Page's up-close-and-personal look back at Led Zeppelin's early 70s peak and David Gilmour's memories of Pink Floyd's fractious heyday to our in-depth investigation into the mysterious death of original AC/DC frontman Bon Scott and our attempts to track down enigmatic guitar hero Ronnie Montrose.

Add in unforgettable interviews with the likes of Queen's Brian May and Roger Taylor, the reunited Black Sabbath, the surviving members of The Doors, modern rock heroes The Foo Fighters and more, it's a document of not just 300 issues of *Classic Rock* but also 60 years of rock itself.

So, happy 300th issue to us. Here's to the next 300.

Dave Everley,
Editor

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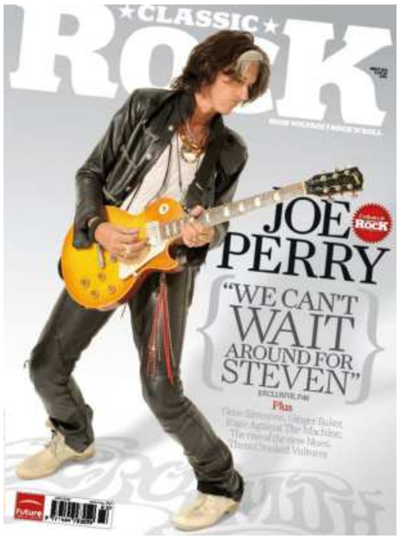

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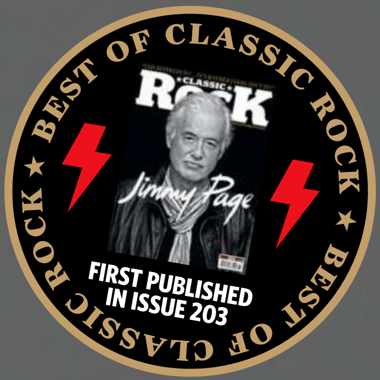


"The fourth album? It's good, isn't it?"

In 2015, the Led Zeppelin reissue campaign was in full swing when **Jimmy Page** granted *Classic Rock* an audience to reveal the secrets of his twin masterpieces, *Led Zeppelin V* and *Houses Of The Holy* – and explain why one of the greatest rock bands of them all was finally part of the past.

Words: **Paul Elliott** Portraits: **Ross Halfin**

It is 10 o'clock on a rainy late summer morning when Jimmy Page arrives at The Gore Hotel to meet with *Classic Rock*. Situated in the London borough of Kensington, Page knows the hotel and the area well. He has a home nearby, and within a few minutes' walk is the Royal Albert Hall, where Led Zeppelin were filmed in concert on January 9, 1970 – which was also Page's 26th birthday.

In the hotel's Green Room, decorated with antique portraits of English nobility and lit by a vast chandelier, Page offers a warm handshake and settles on one of two facing sofas. Now 70, his shoulder-length hair its natural silver, the guitarist has aged better than most of his contemporaries. He is elegantly dressed in black shirt, trousers and boots, and drinking strong black coffee, with sweetener. "Too many of these and I'll start speeding," he says.

There's a lot to talk about. In a conversation that runs to 80 minutes, Page will discuss everything from his life during those heady days of the early 70s as the leader, guitarist and primary creative force in one of the most successful rock groups of all time to his plans to release new music in 2015, music that he has been crafting for years. And he will also address the one question that will not go away: will Led Zeppelin ever perform together again?

But there's a more immediate matter at hand, which is the release of the two Led Zeppelin albums that form the second instalment in the high-profile reissue programme of the band's entire catalogue: *Led Zeppelin IV* and *Houses Of The Holy*. Page smiles broadly when he recalls that untouchable period. "It was a wonderful time," he says. "I can't remember it all. But let's see what I can remember…"

With Led Zep IV and Houses Of The Holy, there's a broad consensus that this was the band at its absolute peak.

Well, I can't say which album is the peak. The first album was a pretty fair introduction to what the band was. That album has so many ideas, and those ideas blossomed as time went on. But the fourth album, yeah, it was really serious, really good.

The received wisdom is that Led Zep IV was a reaction to the negativity that greeted the previous album. Is that how you remember it – that Led Zeppelin III was poorly received?

By the press – yeah. The press didn't 'get' any of the albums. With the third album, they didn't understand why we were doing acoustic music, except that it was all over the first album anyway. I wondered, where are these people coming from?

But the public got it.

We did great by the public, because once you've listened to Led Zeppelin, it's got you. You get it: what's going on, why it ticks, and the brilliant musicianship.

So with the fourth album, did you feel that you had to stick that press criticism back down their throats?

It just got to the point where you didn't bother to pay any attention to them. Even after the third album, there were silly elements of the press in America that were saying, 'Oh, the band's a hype.' And I was thinking, 'Goodness gracious, this is just ridiculous now!' But it didn't matter.

For the making of the fourth album, in December 1970, you took the band to Headley Grange in Hampshire.

It was a manse, an old Victorian house, a wonderful place, and very imposing. I liked the idea of the whole band being in the same house, in residence, working. Fleetwood Mac had rehearsed there, although they didn't record there. So I knew there wouldn't be noise problems. It was in the countryside, so you weren't going to have neighbours complaining. It seemed ideal.

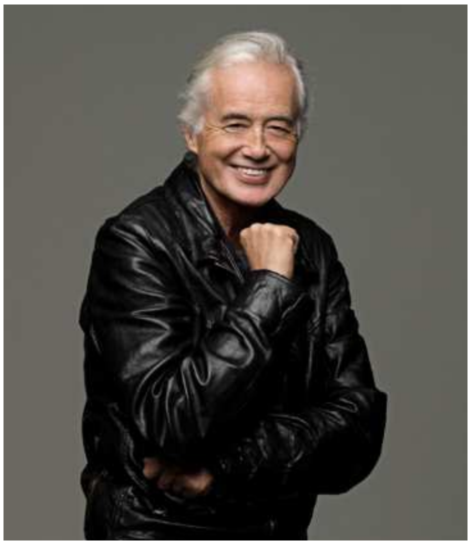
What was the appeal of working there and being in residence? Was it the fact that you could make music at any time, day or night, whenever the inspiration came?

That's the whole point. It's a working environment. If it didn't work, we'd go into a studio. But in fact it was great. While touring, we would mutate songs. From the beginning we were doing it, but now it was really evident from one concert to the next.

Did you take that improvisational approach into the writing and recording of the album?

Yeah. And we used the acoustics of the house. We were playing in this drawing room to begin with, and then John Bonham had another drum kit set up in the hall, with this really high ceiling. When he started playing I said, 'Right, we'll have to do something in here now.' The drum sound in that hall was just huge. You've heard it – on *When The Levee Breaks*. So we were moving from drums in the hall to drums back in another area, and really using the acoustics of the building.

Jimmy shot exclusively for *Classic Rock* in London in September 2014.



> "How could the Sunset Sound sessions be a disaster if you've heard When The Levee Breaks? It's a myth."

Bringing it all back home: Led Zep at London's O2 in 2007.

Did you have a way of preparing for a take, for getting in the right headspace?

Collectively – absolutely. This is how we managed to record so quickly and efficiently. At any time there would be a few songs that you're working on. But working on one number to record, we'd get it up to a serious speed, so it's really firing on all cylinders and the real essence of the song is cooking, and then you'd start recording. It was very easy to get to that point, because you're already rehearsed, but with the red light on there's even more urgency to it. We'd arrive at those takes in a pretty short time – just a handful of takes, maybe.

What if a song just wasn't working?

If a song started to labour, if the essence wasn't happening, we'd stop and do something else. We didn't over-rehearse. We just had them so that they were just right, so that there was this tension – you know, 'Maybe there might be a mistake. But there won't be, because this is how we're all going to do it, and it's going to work!' That was a measure of how good everybody was in this band. And because of that, you could get these 'character' numbers through the whole of the Zeppelin soundscape. Each song has its own character. Theoretically, there was nothing we couldn't do, because musically we were all capable of doing anything. Together, I mean. We didn't need to get in horn sections or whatever. It was all in-house.

Did you feel that you were pushing the envelope with this album?

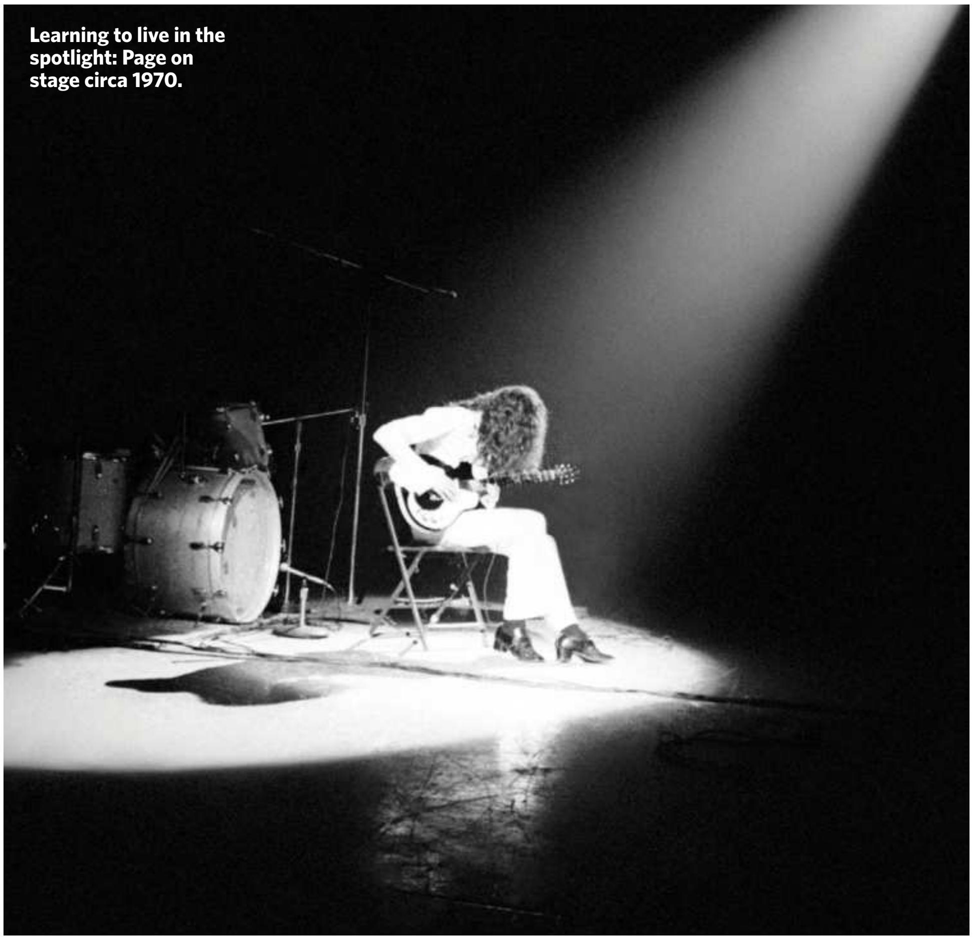
The whole history of Led Zeppelin is musical expansion. We were really pioneering in every way, I think. And with this album, we were moving the acoustic aspect of what we'd done on the third album into these more intimate areas with *Going To California* and *The Battle Of Evermore*.

When I interviewed you in 1993, you said that with Stairway To Heaven you set out to make a "profound" piece of music. Did that make it a difficult song to write?

I had the sections for it. It was a question of piecing them together. But by nature of the fact that it had acceleration through it, it needed some work on it. There was a lot to remember in *Stairway*, when you were playing it and routining the track.

You also said that Robert wrote the lyrics for Stairway To Heaven very quickly, while you were at Headley Grange, with the band working on the arrangement.

I can say – he'll probably deny it, ha ha – but during the running through of *Stairway*, I remember Robert was sitting down in



Learning to live in the spotlight: Page on stage circa 1970.

2 X GETTY

the room and he was writing and writing. At the point where he came to sing it he had a major percentage of the lyrics already done. And he went home and tweaked things. That's how it was. That's what the whole magic of the environment was like. Everybody's creative energies were all joined.

Over the years, Robert has made light of those lyrics, as if he were embarrassed by the naivety in them. But the words in that song are very evocative, very deep.

They are. They come at you on many levels. I thought his lyrics were superb. So… maybe we all criticise our past work. I'm not going to tell you what, but I could say, 'Well, I could have played better guitar on such and such a number.' But I ain't gonna do that, because it is what it is.

Is it true that you would record your solos alone, in complete isolation?

Always. I'd use the same approach as doing the tracks. I'd try to put the solo on at the end, because I wanted it to be totally in character of what's going on with the lyrics. What I'd do is just limber up, limber up, limber up and then, "Okay, put the red light on." Those solos weren't done over hours and hours. I'd know if I was there with it. And they were pretty much improvised. They weren't worked out note for note. Never. The solos were always... take a deep breath and go for it. I might have worked out how I might start it off, but that's it. The solo for *Stairway* comes right into that equation.

Famously, there is a story that the release of the fourth album was delayed because there was a problem with the mixing at Sunset Sound studios in Los Angeles.

There wasn't really a delay. I was at Sunset Sound for much less than a week. I arrived there with [engineer] Andy Johns, and there was literally an earthquake going on when we walked through the airport. In the hotel you could feel the bed shaking with all the aftershocks. We were due to go into the studio, and I said, "Okay, but we're not going to do *Going To California* till the end."

Why not?

Because the lyrics in that song were talking about an earthquake, and we've just arrived during an earthquake! But I wasn't going to turn around and go back to England. It was just Andy Johns and myself, and Sunset Sound was a superb studio. We mixed a lot of the stuff that was done at Headley. But the only evidence you'd know of the Sunset Sound recordings up to now would be *When The Levee Breaks*, because that was the version that went on the album.

It has it been reported that the Sunset Sound sessions were a disaster.

How could it be a disaster if you've heard *When The Levee Breaks*? It's all myth.

So why did you remix the album in the UK?

When the rest of the band heard the Sunset Sound mixes, they didn't get it. So I said, "Okay, we'll remix it again over here." At Sunset Sound, the playback system was so colourful – really sort of high top-end and low bass-end. But when we came back and played it at Olympic [studio in London], where the speakers were very middle-y, suddenly the huge headroom had disappeared. That's all it was – the monitor systems in each studio were so vastly different. It just needed a little bit of EQ mastering and it was fantastic.

The Ages of PAGE

"No ego at all"

Producer/musician **John Carter** recalls hiring the young JP for his band.

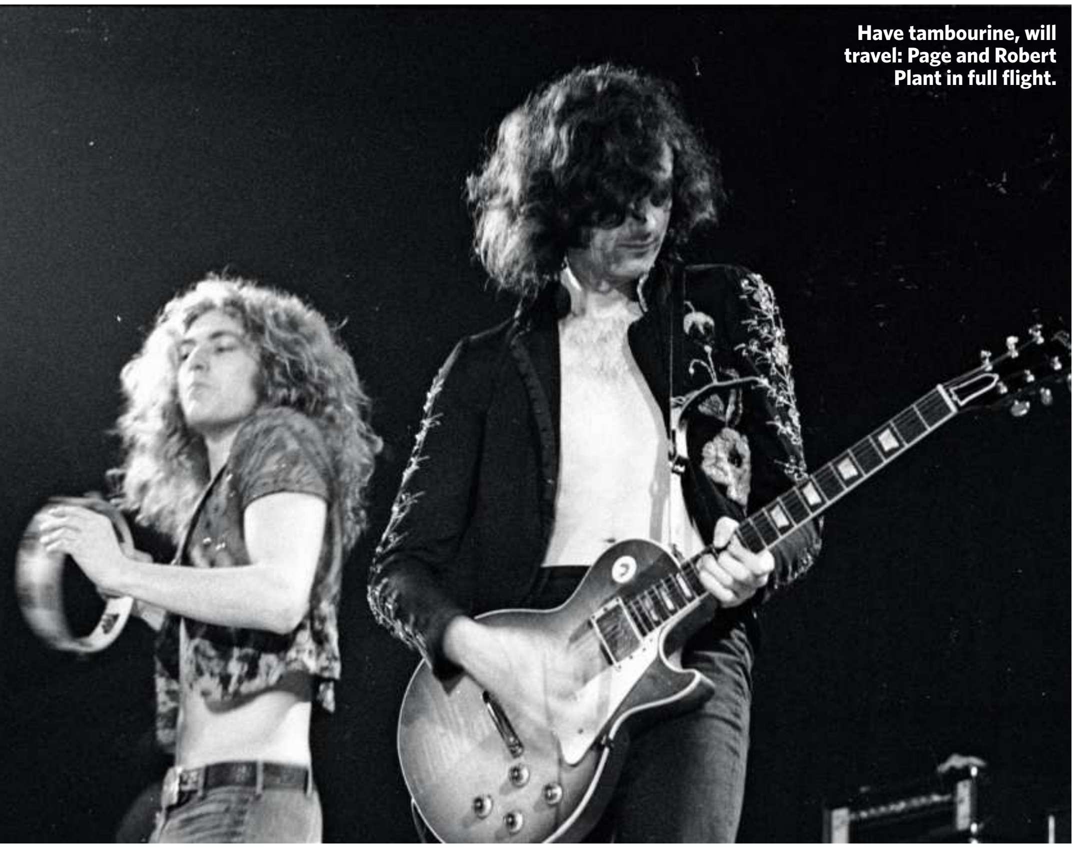
"It must have been 1964. The personnel of my band, Carter-Lewis And The Southerners (pictured), was flexible, and we had a tour coming up but we didn't have a proper band. Me and Ken Lewis knew Jimmy from sessions. We'd played together on [Dave Berry's] *The Crying Game*, and we'd booked him for a few Carter-Lewis sessions, which he was brilliant on. So we asked him to join: 'Yeah, why not?'

"I remember the first session I ever saw Jimmy on. He was eighteen or nineteen, a young lad. He wore normal sixties clothes. I don't even remember his hair being long. We'd all meet round the corner from Decca Studios after sessions and go for a drink. We'd talk about music, the old blues guys, rock'n'roll. He may have been quiet with blokes, but not with girls. I mean, I don't want to give away any secrets.

"Jimmy was different from any other player going around. His invention was the best at that time. But he never took over on a session; no ego at all. He'd say: 'What do you want?' And we'd say: 'Just make something up.' Then he'd make up a solo which was absolutely fantastic. That was when you got the best out of Jimmy Page.

"What happened next? Sessions were getting very busy for him, and I think he wanted to concentrate on that, more than being on the road, because you earned a lot more money. The band broke up soon after. I really did think he'd go on to big things. I was pleased for him with Zeppelin, because he deserved to become famous. He was brilliant then, but with Zeppelin he just went higher and higher.

"For a while we kept in touch. I saw Jimmy again maybe four or five years ago, at an airport. We passed each other and we both just said: 'Aha! It's you!' **HY**



Have tambourine, will travel: Page and Robert Plant in full flight.

GETTY

On the companion disc included with the new reissue of IV, there is a previously unreleased mix of Stairway To Heaven *from the Sunset Sound sessions.*

What did you think of it? It's *Stairway*. You've heard it a million times.

It sounds a little warmer, maybe a little cleaner.

Do you think so? Personally, I think it's more of a hi-fi mix. It's got that expanse, that headroom, a real depth to it. But that's the whole thing about doing a companion disc. It just gives more information, more colours. I really thought that this is so important to do, to give all this extra information to the whole of the studio life of Led Zeppelin… for the fans. I know what they love. I know why there's a bootleg industry out there. I've paid a lot of attention to what was out there on the bootleg market as far as studio material, because I wanted to make sure that what was going on these releases wasn't already out there. I know that no one's even heard the *Stairway* mix, apart from the band.

You first played Stairway To Heaven, Black Dog, Rock And Roll *and* Going To California *live in Belfast on March 5, 1971, eight months before the album was released. Do you remember the reaction?*

In Belfast at that time, there were the Troubles. I don't know what sort of mix of Catholics and Protestants were in that hall in Belfast, but the response to everything was fantastic. And here's the key point. You've just said that we went over there before the album was released. You couldn't do that now. The whole intrigue and mystery of it would be blown because people would be publishing it on YouTube, all the new numbers. But in those days it was really good, because things would just travel by word of mouth.

When that fourth album was released on November 8, 1971, there was no band name and album title on the cover.

It was my idea to have no title. It was a novel idea to put something out which had no title on it, rather than, oh, it's just selling on the name.

The album is officially untitled yet it goes by various names: Led Zep IV, *'Four Symbols', and also 'Zoso', after your symbol…*

I think it's good that everyone calls it different things. With the [Zoso] symbol, people were calling it that, and that was a bit upsetting for the rest of the band [laughs]. It wasn't intended to be like that.

The bosses at Atlantic Records thought that an album with no title and no band name was tantamount to commercial suicide.

They did. I went over to New York with [Zep manager] Peter Grant, and Atlantic were determined to have some words on the cover. I knew they thought: he's impossible to deal with, this one. But it was so right to do it. That album cover is so iconic.

Is it true that the painting on the album cover was found by Robert in an antique shop?

It is. When I was living in Pangbourne, I used to go around the junk shops, picking up all this Arts and Crafts-era furniture. On this one occasion Robert came with me and there it was, this painting.

The cover was symbolic: the painting of the old man on the wall of a demolished house, with modern high-rise blocks behind it.

The imagery there is the old making way for the new. Those new buildings don't look new anymore. But that was the idea.

The way you sequenced this album – the juxtaposition of hard rock tracks and acoustic numbers – is expertly judged.

We were crafting albums for the album market, a certain league outside of pop singles. So it was important, I felt, to have the flow and the rise and fall of the music and the contrast, so that each song would have more impact against the other.

You placed Stairway To Heaven *at the end of side one of the original LP. Did you think about having it at the end of side two as a grand finale?*

No, no, no! *Levee Breaks* had to end it, because it was just so ominous and dense and it was just going to disturb people. After you've caressed them with *Stairway*, now you're going to disturb them [laughs]. That's what it's all about – conjuring up all these different emotions.

That side one is probably the greatest side of vinyl in all of rock history: Black Dog, Rock And Roll, The Battle Of Evermore, Stairway To Heaven. *Really, it's unbeatable.*

It is good, isn't it? But with the whole album, you get the feeling of the creativity of this band. It's just coming in with full force. It's showing the whole picture of what this band is musically. These were really honest performances – performances that you feel. No doubt about it.

If Led Zeppelin's fourth album was the band's masterpiece, what followed was their unsung classic: *Houses Of The Holy*, released on March 28, 1973. In a sense, it was overshadowed by what came before and after it – *IV* and 1975's monolithic *Physical Graffiti* – but it contained some of the most powerful tracks that Zeppelin ever created: *No Quarter, The Rain Song, Over The Hills And Far Away, The Song Remains The Same*. Adding to the mystique was the artwork created by Hipgnosis: a surreal image of naked children climbing the rocky terrain of the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland, beneath a glowing yellow-orange sky. "It's evocative, isn't it?" says Page. "Its innocence, and the idea of us all being vessels of houses of the holy."

The story goes that you rejected the original artwork submitted by Hipgnosis' Storm Thorgerson, and then turned to their other designer, Aubrey 'Po' Powell.

Well, we got on better with Po than with Storm, but that's how they were. If people didn't like one person they'd work with the other one.

> "You know, I heard Sam Fox was on the cover of Houses Of The Holy. So it's not true, then?"

Handy with figures: Page indicates that Led Zeppelin's fourth and fifth album reissues are now airborne.

Zeppelin in the 70s: (l-r) Robert Plant, Jimmy Page, John Paul Jones, John Bonham.

Did you know that the children on the cover are Stefan Gates, now a TV presenter, and his sister Samantha?
I heard it was Sam Fox. So it's not true, then?

That old story about Sam Fox? Most people dismissed that as just another urban myth about Zeppelin.
I thought it made sense because she probably was put in an agency as a child model and all that.

Perhaps you could verify another story about Houses Of The Holy *– that you wrote* The Rain Song *after George Harrison complained to you that Zeppelin never do ballads.*
No, it wasn't *from* George Harrison. He didn't say it to me. I just heard it on the grapevine that he had said, "Oh, Led Zeppelin don't do any ballads." I'm paraphrasing, but it was something similar to that. He probably said it lightheartedly. He probably hadn't really listened to very much Led Zeppelin.

There is also a similarity, in the opening notes of The Rain Song*, to Harrison's classic Beatles song* Something*.*
Yeah [laughs]. I thought it would be interesting to put the first two notes from *Something* into the beginning of *The Rain Song*. But I thought that *The Rain Song* was really nothing like *Something*, so nobody was even going to think of it.

There is such beauty in The Rain Song*. Do you consider it one of your best?*
As a whole piece, yes, it's pretty up there, for sure. As a guitar piece it was really good, but again, it came to life with Bonzo playing really sensitively on the brushes.

On the Houses Of The Holy *tour, in the summer of '73, Zeppelin's gig at Tampa Stadium broke the attendance record that had been held by The Beatles.*
What was it, 52,000?

> *"I love playing live. That's what I should be doing at this point in time. It's ever onward now."*

More. 56,800, to be precise.
Well, we'd played fifty-something thousand the day before in Atlanta. Then we went into this huge thing in Tampa, where your main worry is, can everybody at the back hear what we're doing?

Going on stage for such huge audiences, were you ever nervous?
I always had an edge, what you might call nerves, going on wherever it was. I wondered whether it was just the adrenaline. But I'd always get that sort of edge. There's no doubt about it – you suddenly go into this sort of change, which you might call stage fright. But I was more realistic about what it probably was. It wasn't being frightened on stage. I love being on stage. There's nothing to be frightened about. But there was this edginess, sure.

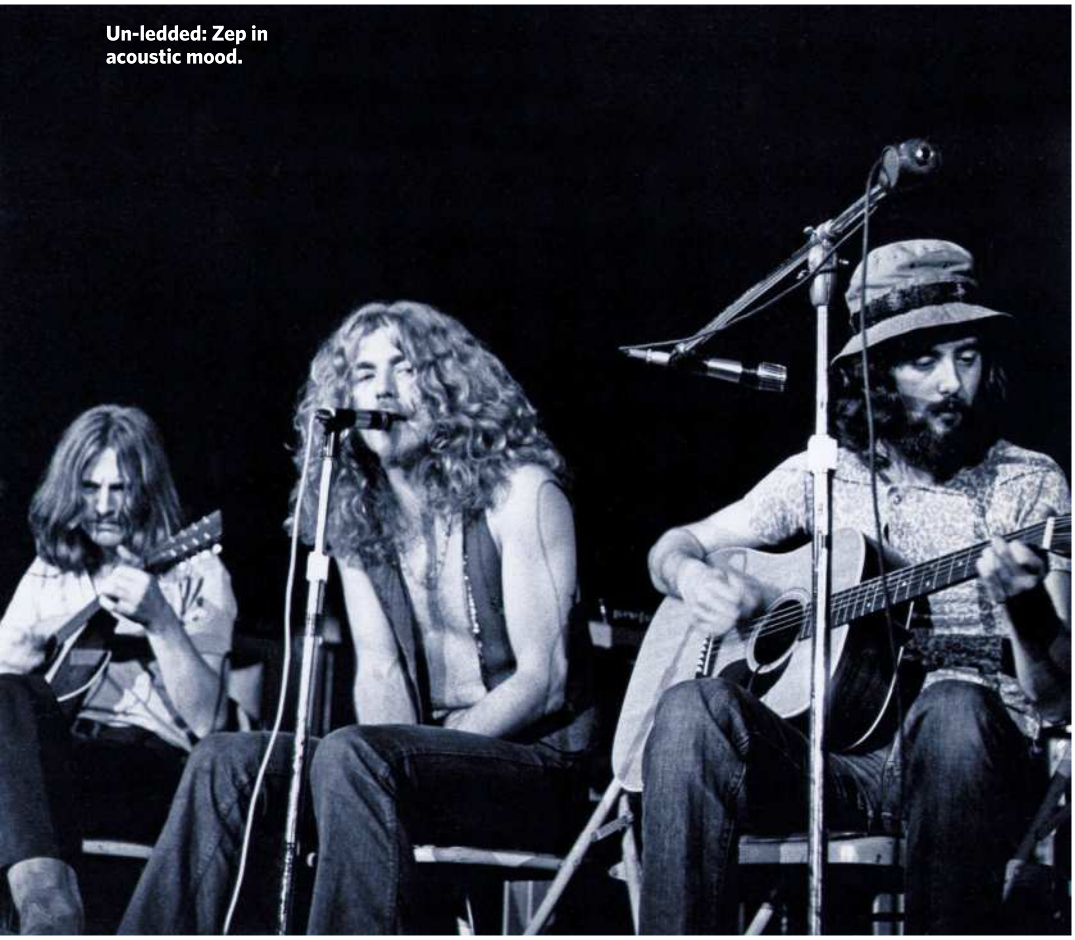
With all the heavy touring that Zeppelin did in the 70s, doing three-hour sets, what kept you going? Was it that the music elevated you?
The whole set just kept stretching, because we loved playing. We could have just done an hour and a half, but we didn't. We wanted to give everybody everything that we could every night. We were totally committed in the ethic of doing that.

Let's talk about your life at this time. With all the work and the success and everything that came with it, did you ever feel disoriented?
No, nothing like that. It was all just a natural progression. In retrospect, if you look at the work we did, you think, Wow, how was that done? But, you know, we were all pretty young. I wouldn't be able to take on a workload like that now – all that touring, five nights a week and the rest of it. But I was young. It was perfectly natural. That's all there is to it.

Did Zeppelin's fame at that point ever feel overwhelming, even frightening?
No. The whole climate was different then, wasn't it? When you're talking about that sort of passion from the fans, the way that it would be manifested was simply that the concerts just got bigger and bigger. So you could see, by the record sales as well, that the popularity was immense. And that was the manifestation of it, playing bigger shows and the response to it. And it never went away. The reality of Led Zeppelin, when you look at it all the way through, was that the audiences just kept swelling, right through to the end when we were doing Knebworth in 1980.

Who apart from the band would hear Zeppelin music before it was presented for release? Ahmet Ertegün, the head of your label?
[Flatly] He'd get the finished album. That's how it was. It was wonderful, because it was so insular. You know what the climate was as far as what you had to do in those days. Literally what you had to do was make albums, then present them – with the cover – and then do more concerts. The record company wasn't all over you. They couldn't be all over you, because you're telling them, "This is it – this is the new album." And because of the demand for the Led Zeppelin albums, they couldn't really get in the way. They didn't want to get in the way of it. Because they could see – I guess history was proving itself – that we knew what we were doing.

Your power was your popularity?
Yes. And as you can see with the history, it was the right decision not to do singles along the way. That gave us the benefit to do exactly what we wanted to do, without having to think, Oh, what's the single going to be? Or having some person from the record company saying, "Where's the single?" Or even worse, saying, "I think you should do this!"



Un-ledded: Zep in acoustic mood.

GETTY X2

So there was never interference from them?
No. I'd lived through it with The Yardbirds, and I knew the climate wasn't right for that.

Were you as much of a perfectionist in terms of business as you were with the music?
God, no! But that perfectionism applied to everything, to be honest.

Being such a perfectionist, were you a difficult person to work with?
No. I don't think I was at all.

Did you ever sense that the band thought you were driving them too hard?
I don't know if anyone thought I was. You're always trying to strive to be better and better and better. That's all there is to it. And sometimes, whatever you've done isn't good enough. Do better, do better. But, you know, that's my own thing. And I haven't changed. That's how I am.

In the 34 years since Led Zeppelin disbanded following the death of John Bonham, Page has continued to make music, albeit on a limited scale. There have been collaborations with Paul Rodgers and David Coverdale, and even with his old foil Robert Plant – the pair played on each other's solo albums before officially reuniting for two albums in the 90s, 1994's Zep-reimagining *No Quarter: Jimmy Page And Robert Plant Unledded*, and 1999's all-new *Walking Into Clarksdale*.

But Led Zeppelin remained part of his life throughout. Ever since 1982's archive collection *Coda*, Page has served as the curator and the guardian of the band's legacy. But now, seven years after their one-off reunion show, this is all that remains of Led Zeppelin: the past. And for Page, it is now time for a new challenge.

What does the future hold for you? In terms of the music you're making now, does that necessitate having a band?
Yes. I'm not going to just go out and do concerts with one guitar or even two guitars – one electric and one acoustic.

If you're going to make a new album…
Maybe…

If so, would it be similar to Outrider*, on which you had three singers?*
[Smiling] We'll have to wait and see, won't we? The music I've been writing, it's got various moods to it, various textures. That isn't going to change. So there will be real surprises within it, you know? But there would have to be. I wouldn't really be happy about it unless there was. But I have got material. It's sort of there. And in a way I'm really pleased that I haven't recorded it yet.

Why?
Because it will still be good. If something's good, it is good, isn't it? Riffs and things – they're either good or they're not good.

Robert Plant was recently asked about the possibility of making a modern Zeppelin album. He said: "The weight of expectation is too great." Do you understand where he's coming from?
No. No, no. Because I'm not doing a modern Led Zeppelin album. I'm doing the music that will be a summing up of where I am at this point in time.

The Ages of PAGE

"We'd drink JD together"

John Miles on collaborating on Page's 1987 solo album *Outrider*.

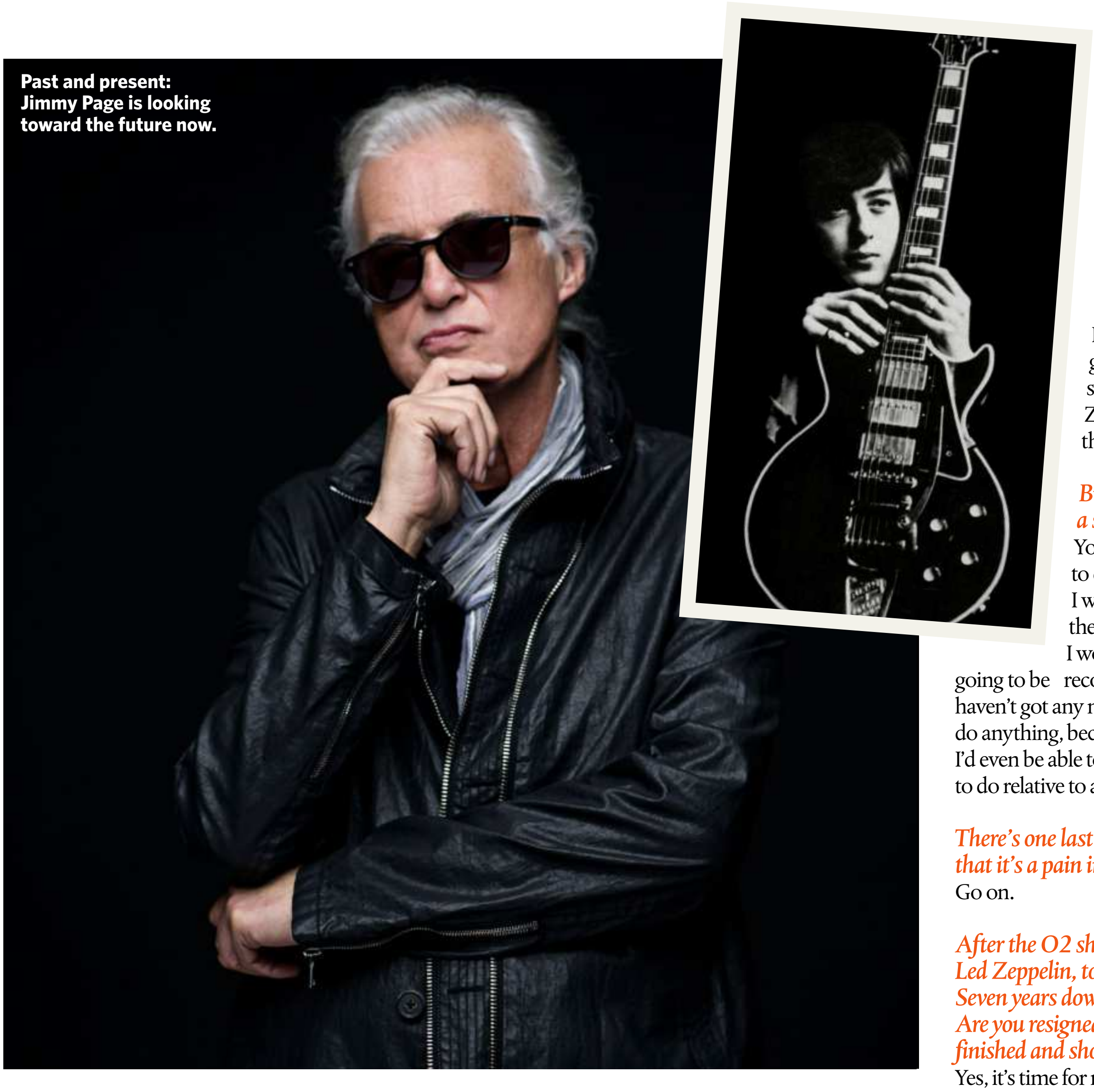
"I'd never met Jimmy before we started working together in '87 on *Outrider*. His manager called to ask if I'd be interested in doing some writing. So I went down to his studio and we wrote *Wasting My Time*, *Wanna Make Love* and a few other things. We'd both jam and come up with riffs. It took a while to get to know him, but we hit it off. And I discovered he had a wicked sense of humour. Then he decided he was going to take the album on the road and he said to me one day: 'Can you do it?'

"Most of the shows were in America. And I felt a lot of pressure having to sing Robert Plant's songs – I think Jimmy felt pressured too. I remember Robert turned up at a gig in Boston. Jimmy didn't want him anywhere near the building, so Robert turned up in a baseball cap and disguise.

"There wasn't really much time off, but when there was, Jimmy and I used to drink Jack Daniel's together. I remember flying to a gig in New Orleans on a private plane. As I was sitting with Jimmy, talking, I looked out of the window and there were fucking flames coming out of the engine. So we just had a couple more drinks! It was surreal.

"There were ideas left over from *Outrider*, but we never got round to doing anything with them. There was talk of making another album, but I felt the whole Zeppelin thing was pulling Jimmy back into that. The demand for a reunion was just ridiculous. So any plans we had just went by the wayside.

"My favourite memory of Jimmy? Just being on stage with him. He'd be standing there with sweat and snot everywhere – and a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. It was just incredible to turn around and see him playing with all his might." **RH**



Past and present: Jimmy Page is looking toward the future now.

But do you get what Robert was saying? Do you feel that what you created with Led Zeppelin in the past is in some way a burden on you as you're making new music?
Well, there is pressure. But then you have to put it in context with actually thinking of all that pressure that's built up over all those decades and putting your arse on the line for one night at the O2. What sort of pressure is that? You can imagine what it was like for that show. You know, one shot. At least when you're recording an album you've got more than one shot at the solo. So you just have to look at it like that. New music is new music. But it still has to be good. It has to be vital. It has to connect with people. It doesn't want to be limp and half-hearted. It really needs to connect on one level or another, whether it's got that intensity to it, or it's something that is more rhythmic or voodoo-like, or something that is more sensitive or caressing. And that is what you're doing – you're a musician. You're not thinking about whether it's paling in the shade of Led Zeppelin. What sort of nonsense is that? [laughs] But you know what I'm saying.

Yes. But when we think back to Walking Into Clarksdale, *your last original album…*
Yeah, that's like a minimalist album.

That was sixteen years ago.
Was that my last album?

Your last original album, yes.
Good. I've only ever had one solo album out in the past anyway, and that was in 1988. So I didn't really try to cash in on the market, did I? I've done other projects along the way. I've worked with David Coverdale and this and that.

But do you feel that you've done enough?
Well, you can never do enough. But I don't care. It doesn't matter. It is what it is. And hopefully, next year I will be seen to be playing – because you need to be seen to be playing. That's why I've put so much effort into stockpiling all of this new material. I know the importance of the Led Zeppelin legacy, if you like. So that's why I've been stockpiling over a couple of years. I think it's important. That's the way to look at it and that's the way to do it.

> *"I'm not doing a modern Led Zeppelin album. I'm doing music that sums up where I am at now."*

So do you need a singer to make this new music work?
Why, are you volunteering?

Come on, Jimmy. Don't be silly.
Well, let's put it this way: I don't sing. I've said that on numerous occasions. I'm not a singer.

What is your singing voice like?
I don't know. I haven't really given it a shot, although I sort of sang many years ago, on the first Zeppelin album and a little bit on the second album.

But to answer the question about a singer…
You're asking about what I'm going to do? Okay, let's put it this way. What I would concentrate on would be the music that is going to be there. I wouldn't approach whatever was going to be recorded in a flippant way at all. But I haven't got any musicians ready at the moment to do anything, because it won't be until next year that I'd even be able to do that. I've got so much promo to do relative to all of this [the Zeppelin reissues].

There's one last thing I have to ask, and I know that it's a pain in the arse…
Go on.

After the O2 show, you wanted to continue with Led Zeppelin, to do more shows. Robert did not. Seven years down the line, nothing has changed. Are you resigned to the fact that Led Zeppelin is finished and should fans just accept that too?
Yes, it's time for me to move on to do other things. I've got a pretty fair old musical heritage. It goes way, way back to being a teenager. It goes all the way through from there to almost yesterday. I enjoy that. Ever since I was a kid, it was my passion to play music, to make music, and, you know, it makes people happy. If you do something as a living that makes people happy, you're a very fortunate man. That's bloody great. And I don't mean this lightly when I say that is a wonderful lifetime achievement. That's a great feeling.

For Jimmy Page, seven years of frustration have come to an end. After that O2 show, when Plant refused a Led Zeppelin tour – no matter how much money was on the table – Page, Jones and Jason Bonham rehearsed with Steven Tyler and Myles Kennedy. Whether they would have used the Led Zeppelin name, Page would not say. But in the end, nothing came of it. The subtext was quite simple: without Robert Plant, there is no Led Zeppelin.

In August 2014, Plant said of Page: "He should get on and do something. He's a superb talent. Come on and give it to us." Making new music, and playing it all over the world, is what Plant has done since that last Zeppelin performance. And now, belatedly, Page is gearing up do the same.

"I love making music," Page says. "I love playing live. That's it. That's what I should be doing at this point in time. It's ever onward now."

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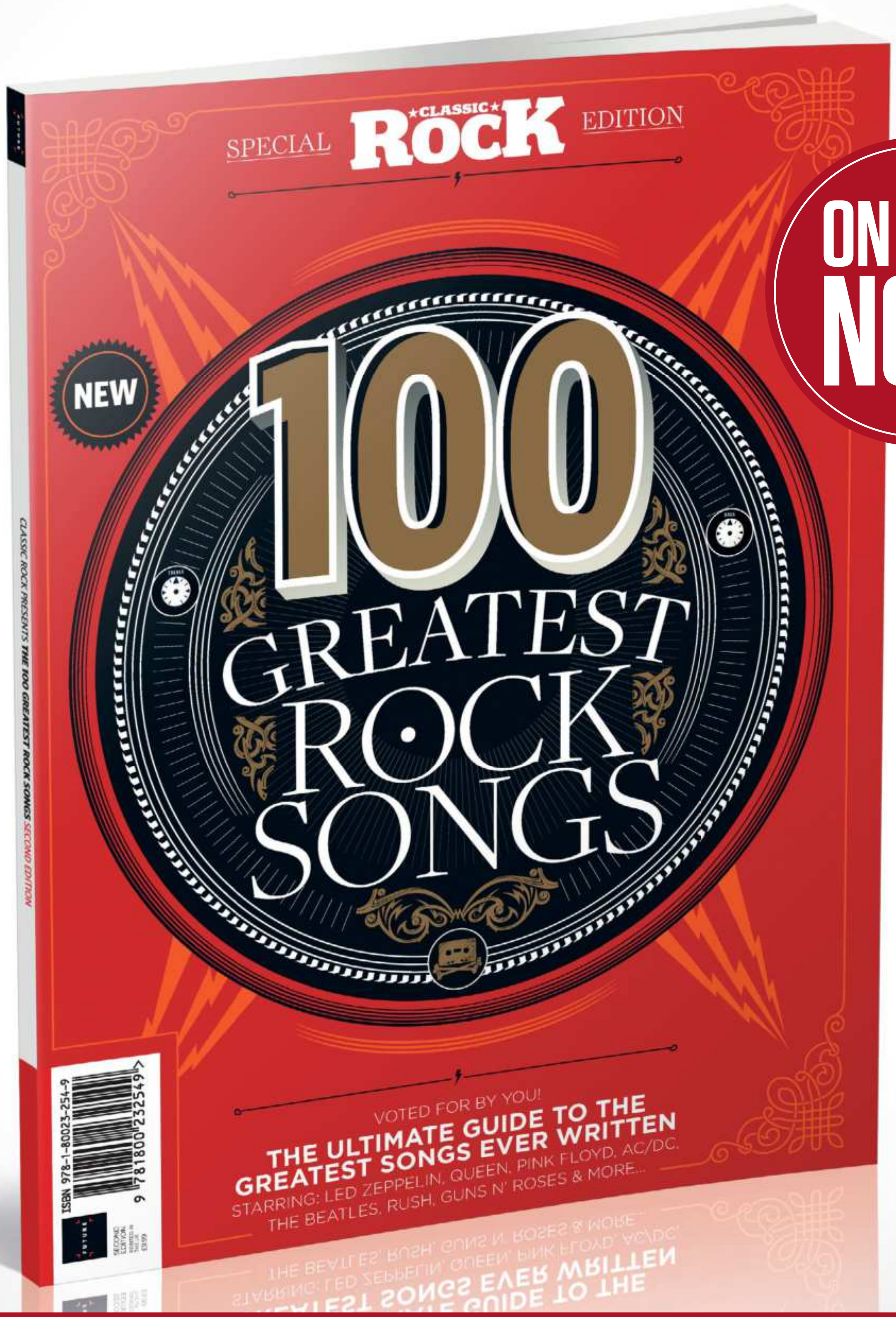

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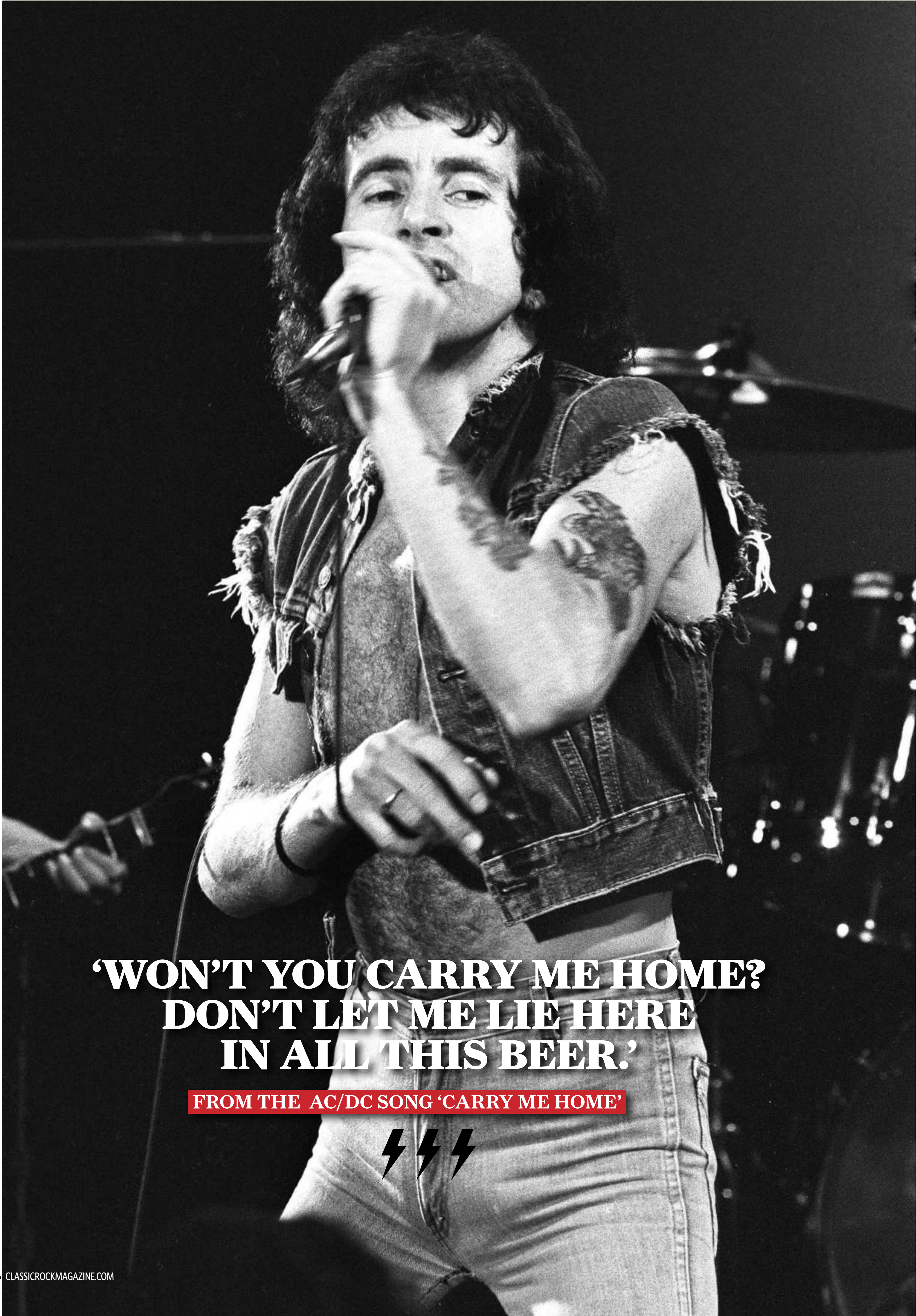

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

‘WON’T YOU CARRY ME HOME? DON’T LET ME LIE HERE IN ALL THIS BEER.’

FROM THE AC/DC SONG ‘CARRY ME HOME’

Bon Scott

A TOUCH TOO MUCH

On February 19, 1980, **AC/DC** frontman **Bon Scott** died in tragic circumstances. But mysteries surround the event to this day. In 2005, *Classic Rock*'s **Geoff Barton** investigated Bon's last hours, the underworld he moved in, the disappearance of the enigmatic 'Alistair Kinnear' – the last man to see Bon alive – and the UFO connection.

Unless a person has suicidal tendencies, no one can choose where he or she dies. Least of all if that person is a rock star with a hard-drinking, fullon party-animal lifestyle. But having said that, there's something uniquely unnerving about the location of AC/DC frontman Bon Scott's sad demise.

It's an overcast day in early December 2004, and Classic Rock is making its way to a fateful setting: number 67 Overhill Road, in East Dulwich, South London. This is where Bon died, his body found abandoned in a Renault 5 car parked on the road just outside the address nearly 25 years ago.

We don't plan to rubberneck the scene like a bunch of sickos ogling a motorway pile-up, we just felt that we had to check it out before we began to write this story. You can call us morbid if you like; we'll just call it research.

It takes a while to get to East Dulwich from the centre of the city. You ride the Victoria-line Tube to Brixton and then hop on the single-decker P4 bus. You rumble through posh Dulwich Village, and the best part of half an hour later you alight outside the grim tenements of the Lordship Lane high-rise council estate.

You walk a little way up the street, turn left by the Harvester pub, and Overhill Road is the second turning on the right. The first thing you notice is a tatty building on the corner called the Rockbank Hotel, and you can't help but raise a wry smile.

Number 67 is at the top of steep gradient. And it ain't a pretty sight. It's a dour, featureless block of flats penned in by ranks of bright-green wheelie bins. It could have been transplanted here direct from the Eastern bloc.

There's a graffiti'd old ambulance parked directly outside the flats, which wipes that grin off your face straight away. To compound the irony, there's even a Renault behind it (although admittedly it's a Mégane, not a 5).

The trees that line Overhill Road are bare of leaves, but number 67's front garden is a thriving jungle of roots, weeds and hawthorns. There's litter all over the place. There's a wheelbarrow in the corner that had once been full of white paint, but which is now all dried-out and crusty.

The only evidence of anything remotely rock'n'roll-related is a skateboard propped up in the porch of the house next door. Of Bon Scott's heritage, there is not a sign.

But hang on a second… There's a scratchy silver plaque attached to the front of number 67. Tiptoe up the path, look closely, and you can see a handful of scribbled tributes grouped around the legend 'Flats 1-6'. The messages have been written in obvious haste: 'To Bon, from Björn in Sweden'; 'AC-Foxi-DC'; 'Ronald and Frank from Germany – cheers';

'To Bon, Szmery from Poland.' And that's it. Nothing else, apart from the drone of an aircraft; the distant sound of schoolchildren playing; brambles rustling dryly.

Overhill Road must have changed substantially since 1980, the year of Bon's death. Opposite number 67 is a big new apartment block called Dawson Heights that plainly wasn't around two and a half decades ago.

The Asian proprietor of a nearby Londis store has been in the country for only three months. He expresses surprise when he hears that a top rock star popped his clogs just down the road. The shopkeeper says he doesn't know of any local residents who would have been on the scene so many years ago.

A tradesman unloading a white van shrugs; he's only making a delivery, and he actually comes from Bromley. He's heard of AC/DC, but not of Bon Scott.

There's no reply from pressing any of the door buzzers stuck on number 67's front wall, just the empty hiss of the intercom, like static from a badly tuned radio.

You turn on your heels with an air of resignation and trudge back down the hill. Fine rain fills the air. As you grapple with your umbrella, you notice the silhouette of a bright-yellow dog stencilled on to the pavement. It's accompanied by a warning to owners not to allow their pets to shit on the pavement: Bag It & Bin It. Try as you might, you can't prevent a wry smile returning to your lips: Bag It & Bin It? It sounds like a bleedin' Bon Scott song title.

Ronald Belford Scott was born on July 9, 1946, in Kirriemuir, Scotland. He emigrated with his family to Australia in 1952. He left school at age 15, and held a variety of part-time jobs before deciding to ply his trade in music; as a drummer-cum-vocalist, he enjoyed limited success before a motorcycle accident cut short his ambitions.

Once recovered, Bon took a job driving a stomping little outfit called AC/DC around: down the streets of Melbourne, across tumbleweed trails, along desert roads and beyond. But Bon always hankered to be a solid-gold-proper AC/DC band member, not a humble roadie. ▷

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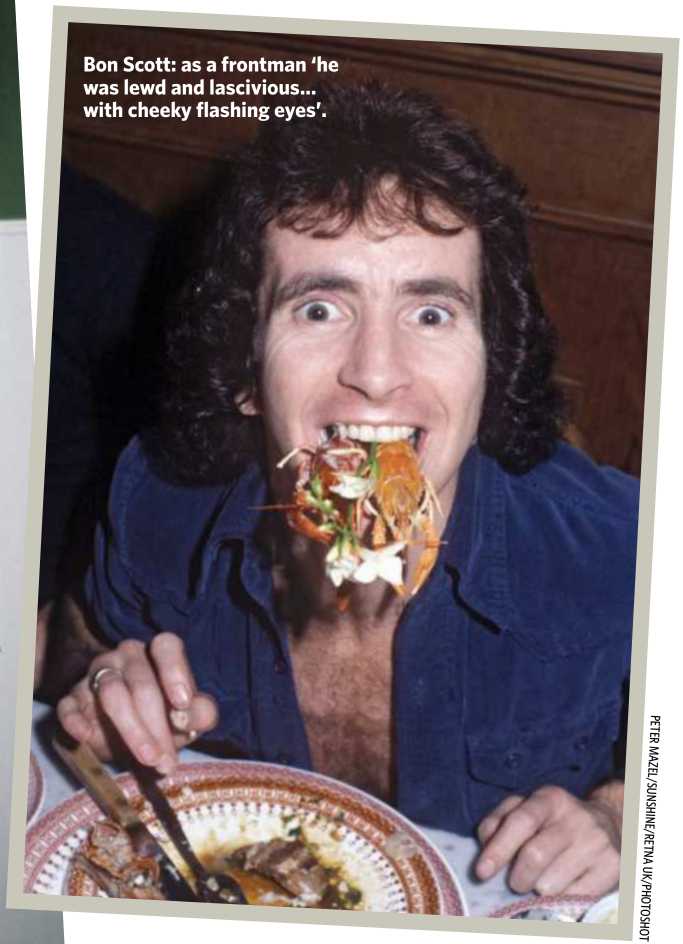
Have a drink on me: ex-UFO guitarist Paul Chapman recalls Bon drinking aftershave.

PETER MAZEL/SUNSHINE/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK



Bon Scott: as a frontman 'he was lewd and lascivious... with cheeky flashing eyes'.

PETER MAZEL/SUNSHINE/RETNA UK/PHOTOSHOT

Tempering his bright-eyed braggadocio somewhat, he charmed his way into the group's affections and eventually achieved his aim, joining AC/DC as singer in late September 1974, replacing the glam rockin' Dave Evans. AC/DC's brand new frontman made an immediate impact. Bon Scott was TNT.

Bon was only in AC/DC for a little over five years; he died at age 33 on February 19, 1980. Nevertheless, this bare-chested, black-haired, garrulous'n'glowering, lewd'n'lascivious larrikin was justifiably named the greatest rock frontman of all time in *Classic Rock* No.68. 'Bon had a riveting presence,' we wrote. 'He was cocky but he wasn't conceited. He was vulgar but he wasn't boorish. He was tough as nails but with a soft white underbelly. He was a hero, an icon, but he was also the guy next door, lying underneath a greasy motorbike with a spanner in his hand.'

But don't just take our word for it. Even today Bon is fondly remembered by many of his peers. "I knew Bon for many, many years," Jimmy Barnes, former frontman with Oz rockers Cold Chisel, recently told *Classic Rock*. "He was a good mate of mine. When I was about 15 I used to go and see him in Fraternity [one of Bon's pre-AC/DC outfits], who were a great rock'n'roll band. Then he had that motorbike accident that took him off the scene for a while. And when he recovered he went off to join AC/DC. I then took his place in Fraternity – which was one of the sharpest learning curves of my life. I owe a lot to Bon.

"What a lot of people don't realise," Barnes adds, "is that he was an R&B singer. His favourite singer was Sam Moore [of Sam & Dave]; their tones were very similar. To me, Bon brought something to AC/DC that they've lacked since his death – that tongue-in-cheek humour. You could never tell whether he was laughing with you, or at you. The chemistry between him and the Young brothers [guitarists Angus and Malcolm] was as good as Keith Richards and Mick Jagger… anyone, y'know? They were as menacing and as funny as anything I ever saw. And I used to see it regularly in small clubs in Australia."

Angry Anderson, the aggressive, shaven-headed singer with Australia's legendary Rose Tattoo, endorses Barnes's comments: "Bon was a gypsy, a vagabond, a buccaneer, a bad boy and a rock'n'roll outlaw. He was truly a street poet, documenting in lyric and performance all that he thought, felt and cared about life. He was the only other singer I ever invited to sing with the Tatts – whenever he felt like it."

This writer first met Bon Scott in May 1976. *Sounds* music weekly had taken the unprecedented step of sponsoring a fully-fledged British tour by an obscure band called AC/DC. The down under-based group's UK schedule was a 19-dater that kicked off on June 11, '76 at Glasgow City Hall, and climaxed at London's Lyceum Ballroom (nowadays better known for housing the stage production of Disney's The Lion King) on July 7. It was very a bold move for Sounds to lend its support to such an unknown band.

"I remember being invited by Atlantic [then AC/DC's record label] to see a film – they weren't called videos then – of Angus and friends taken in Australia," remembers Alan Lewis, who was editor of *Sounds* at the time. "And I was so blown away that it seemed like a no-brainer – that term wasn't around then either! – to get behind them."

Before the so-called *Sounds*-AC/DC 'Lock Up Your Daughters Summer Tour' started, I was invited to a low-key club gig the band had arranged at the Retford Porterhouse, just outside Nottingham. Prior to that show, I had also been to see AC/DC at London's Marquee (in those days in Wardour Street). 'If your face doesn't break out into an epidemic of smiles during the opening bars of the band's set, you must be a manic depressive,' ran the enthusiastic report.

Returning home from Retford in the back of AC/DC's van, my abiding memory is of a booze-sodden Bon Scott falling asleep on the rickety seat alongside, cradling an empty brandy bottle lovingly in his arms.

By the time we got back to AC/DC's rented house in Barnes, west London, as dawn was breaking, Bon was rousing from his stupor; his cheeky flashing eyes were beginning to become alive and alert once more.

But less than four years later, sozzled out of his brain while on board an entirely different vehicle, Bon would fall asleep and never wake up again. Almost 25 years after Bon Scott's death, there are still many unexplained events that surround it.

The story that everyone knows is this: after spending Christmas 1979 in Australia, Bon was in London in the New Year, working up songs for the next AC/DC studio album, the follow-up to *Highway To Hell*. He

‘BON’S BODY WAS CURLED AROUND THE CAR’S GEAR STICK, HIS NECK TWISTED, HIS DENTAL PLATE DISLODGED.’

was living in a flat in Ashley Court, Victoria, London, with his new Japanese girlfriend, Anna Baba. Also in the frame was Bon’s former girlfriend, Australian Margaret ‘Silver’ Smith, a renowned heroin user and dealer who was a familiar figure in London’s then thriving rock’n’roll scene.

Author Clinton Walker relates the following story in his biography Highway To Hell: The Life & Times Of AC/DC Legend Bon Scott: on Monday evening, February 18, 1980, Bon phoned Silver Smith to invite her along to see a band at Dingwalls in Camden, north London. Silver declined, but said she had a friend – Alistair (sometimes spelled Alasdair) Kinnear – who would be delighted to accompany him. In the end, Bon and Kinnear ended up at the Music Machine, a venue just down the road from Dingwalls at the bottom end of Camden High Street, near Mornington Crescent Tube station.

Two days later, following Bon’s sudden death, Kinnear was quoted in the Wednesday, February 20 edition of London’s *Evening Standard* newspaper: “I met up with Bon to go to the Music Machine, but he was pretty drunk when I picked him up. When we got there, he was drinking four whiskies straight in a glass at a time.”

Events begin to get rather hazy from here on in. The oft-repeated version is that Kinnear drove Bon back to the singer’s flat in Victoria, but a boozed-up Scott had passed out in the car in the meantime, and apparently could not be stirred. So Kinnear then made a diversion to East Dulwich, where he lived in a flat at number 67 Overhill Road. Kinnear parked his car – a tiny, French-built supermini – outside his home, but Bon remained unconscious. He simply couldn’t be shifted.

“I just could not move him,” Kinnear told London evening newspaper the Standard, “so I covered him with a blanket and left him a note to tell him how to get up to my flat in case he woke up.”

Kinnear says he went to bed in the early hours of Tuesday, February 19, and that he didn’t wake until the following evening. “I went to sleep and it was later in the evening [reportedly at 7.45pm] when I went back out to the car, and I knew something was wrong immediately.”

Inside Kinnear’s car, Bon Scott lay dead. ‘He could not find a comfortable position in the small car,’ Clinton Walker recounts in his book. ‘His body was curled around the gearstick, his neck twisted, his dental plate dislodged. The bile rose up in his throat and blocked his asthmatic windpipe.’

Bon’s body was taken to nearby King’s College Hospital. The coroner concluded that the vocalist had died due to acute alcoholic poisoning. There was no mention of drugs being involved.

Kinnear – allegedly a would-be musician; apparently a bass player – disappeared a couple of days later, and his flat in East Dulwich was ransacked by persons unknown. Kinnear has never been heard of since.

Much has been made of the British heavy rock band UFO’s role in the events leading up to Bon’s death. Indeed some reports suggest that on the evening he died Bon had intended to meet up with the band’s vocalist Phil Mogg and bassist Pete Way at the Music Machine in Camden. This writer even remembers AC/DC’s manager at the time, Peter Mensch, going so far as to criticise UFO’s party-hard lifestyle and bemoan the negative influence it had on Bon.

Classic Rock recently spoke extensively to Pete Way and ex-UFO guitarist Paul Chapman to get their take on Bon’s death. Chapman, for one, has an intriguing tale to tell – and one that clashes with Scott biographer Walker’s version of the tragic events. Indeed the UFO pair’s memories differ substantially from many previously published reports. And while it should be remembered that both Way and Chapman were heroin users in the early 80s, and that their testimonies may be unreliable, their recollections – to *Classic Rock* at least – sound at least as credible as any others.

We should mention here that it’s unlikely that Way and Chapman have spoken recently to correlate, or collaborate on, their stories. Way knew that we wanted talk to him about Bon Scott; Chapman didn’t; we merely requested the latter’s assistance on a ‘project’ we were working on.

The two fell out during the recording of *Back From The Dead*, the recently released comeback album from Pete Way’s band Waysted. Chapman, who is based in the US, contributed guitar parts for the album and sent them over to England. But Way rejected them, claiming they weren’t good enough. Unknown guitarist Chris George was brought in to play on Waysted’s album instead of Chapman.

MICHAEL BROWNING
MANAGER OF AC/DC, 1974-79

Michael Browning took over as AC/DC’s manager in November 1974. His introduction to the band was when they played the Hard Rock Café in Melbourne, which he was running at the time. AC/DC split with Browning acrimoniously in 1979, and signed to the Leber-Krebs organisation in the US, with Peter Mensch as their personal manager. Interview: Joe Matera

WHAT WERE YOUR FIRST IMPRESSIONS WHEN YOU FIRST MET Bon?

I had known Bon for many years prior to him joining AC/DC, from when he was in a band called The Valentines. The Valentines were a satin-clad, bell-bottom-wearing teeny-bop band. Then he later joined Fraternity, which was the total opposite of The Valentines: an earthy, almost hippy kind of group. But when he joined AC/DC the real true character of Bon came out. I think a lot of people were surprised initially when he joined AC/DC, because it would have been the last place they would have expected to see Bon. But then again, in their early days AC/DC had very much a glam-rock vibe happening, so if Bon had gone from The Valentines into AC/DC it would have made more sense.

WHAT DID Bon BRING TO AC/DC?

He brought an enormous presence and character into the group. And I rate Bon as a lyricist up there with the greats, alongside Jim Morrison and the likes. Bon was a poet first and a vocalist second. And he was a very highly intelligent lyricist and poet. He really took the Aussie larrikin archetype to a whole different level. Within AC/DC it showed that there was a lot about his character that was really kept under wraps in his previous groups. So in joining AC/DC he was really able to really be himself.

DID YOU EVER PERCEIVE Bon TO BE A LOOSE CANNON?

Yes and no. But the one thing you can always say about Bon is that he never once let anybody down. He could go and get as fucked up as he liked, but he would always be where he had to be on a professional level. So you could say he lived on the edge but in a professional way [laughs].

WAS THERE ANYTHING EVER DONE TO KEEP HIM UNDER CONTROL?

No, as Bon was a pretty intelligent guy and he knew his limitations.

COULD YOU OR ANYBODY ELSE HAVE FORESEEN IN ANY WAY HIS UNTIMELY DEATH?

Well, Bon did always used to say that he was pretty sure he wouldn’t live beyond 40. So I think in some ways everybody kind of expected it to happen eventually if he was left to his own devices.

CAN YOU SHARE SOME STORIES YOU REMEMBER ABOUT HIM?

There is one funny story that we used to laugh a lot about at the time, but the details are sketchy now. There was this time where Bon had two different girls in the maternity ward of the same hospital in Melbourne, and both women were totally unaware of each other. Another time, when the band played the Glasgow Apollo... he did his thing of where he used to go out into the audience. Anyway, this time he actually went outside the gig and ended up getting locked out. He had to talk his way back into the gig during a song! To me, that typified Bon.

Classic Rock met up with Way at Waysted singer Fin Muir's flat in Milton Keynes. We had arranged the meeting because we remembered the famous photograph, taken by Ross Halfin, of Way posing with Bon Scott backstage at a UFO gig at Hammersmith Odeon (now Apollo) in February 1980. This was the last photo taken of Bon before his death, and Way has vivid memories of it: "Yes, you're right, that was me with Bon. He was hanging out backstage; he was a mate."

Way told us about when he first encountered AC/DC: "It was when they played the Marquee. I went as a fan, cos I am a fan. I had heard *Livewire*, I think it was, and I thought: 'I love this'. I went down and became friendly with them."

Later, UFO and AC/DC spent several months touring in the US together. "They were supporting us. They were special guests; that's before they'd broken through," Way recollects. "There was us two and Foreigner. That was a good one. AC/DC hated Foreigner, because they'd do everything to make us not go down well!"

Way was mightily impressed by Bon Scott as a frontman: "He was fantastic," he gasps. "Do you know who Bon reminds me of? Alex Harvey. I'm a big fan of Alex Harvey – *Faith Healer* and that. It's the same thing; Bon had the same attitude. Sensational. Maybe in a movie you can create a Bon, but you can't create a Bon in real life. Bon created himself."

Way fondly remembers bon as "a really nice person. A very nice person. Had a drink, got drunk, went and played, sung better than anybody. [It was] the AC/DC attitude, and Bon was perfect for them. There was no: 'Oh, I think I'm going to see if I can do a harmony here', it was like: 'This is the way we are'. It hit you in the face like a truck, because it was something better than anything else. It was something so special – people with their own minds, [who had made] their own decisions about music, and had their own principles.

"AC/DC wrote the law about playing rock'n'roll. As simple as that. And Bon was brilliant. You'd see him first thing in the morning, and he'd been with the barmaid or something, and he'd go: 'Had a good workout last night'. He'd get out of the elevator, he'd clap his hands and he'd say: 'Large Jack Daniel's.' Brilliant."

Unprompted, Way brings up the subject of Bon Scott's death: "I'm still alive, Bon isn't. I'm not saying his lifestyle should be endorsed or recommended, but you have to say that certain people lived in a different world, or created a different world. You write movies about people like Bon Scott."

Scott was addicted to Mars Bars; his teeth were rotten.

DICK BARNATT/REDFERNS/GETTY

Bon's demise, Way says, affected him badly: "It hit me hard. And it's funny, it took his death to wake the world to AC/DC. It was like, something special. Punk rock almost made it, but AC/DC made it to the max. Bon launched AC/DC's career into stardom. You can't buy a Bon Scott. But you know, when we were on tour in the US with them, every night I watched Angus and Bon I thought, wow! It was like a hurricane. It was much better than UFO, and we had to go on and follow it."

We return to memories of that photograph of Way and Bon backstage at Hammersmith Odeon in February 1980. Way continues: "Now we as UFO were on substances, right? We were using heroin after the show. I've got to be very careful here. One of the guys that was bringing it to us was Australian, and he came down with Bon. And, you know, if you do cocaine and drink you can get a violent reaction. But if you've never done heroin before – and we were doing heroin after the show like we always did – and you drink, the odds are that at some point you'll fall asleep, and you'll choke and you'll die."

Rania Habal, MD, of the Society For Academic Emergency Medicine, places Way's comments into context: "Alcohol is a very common co-ingestant in heroin overdoses," he comments. "Additionally, a fatal heroin overdose is nearly always caused by respiratory arrest."

So, Way remembers Bon hanging out with a heroin dealer at that time. Would he go so far as to say that Scott was doing smack backstage with UFO? "I don't really know," Way shrugs, "but you generally know the symptoms. Cos we were doing smack and Bon was there… and he drank a lot. But, you know, a lot of people drink a lot, but they drink and throw up and live to tell the tale."

Who was the Australian guy who arrived with Bon? "Joe Silver or whoever it was." [Way is getting confused here: this name is an amalgam of Joe Bloe/Joe King and Silver Smith; see Paul Chapman interview later in this story.] "Well, he had different names. Lots of different names. Look, some people sell drugs; you can't make judgements against them… He was a nice guy. Like, if someone dies in a car crash because they've got drunk in a bar, you can't blame the barman. Just because somebody has cocaine or heroin or something like that and brings it down to your friends… You can't point a finger at anybody if they're living a life of excess. And unfortunately I think what probably happened… If you're not skilled at the art of heroin, then you do dance with the Devil…

"But what a beautiful guy, what a great songwriter Bon was… As I say, it was like Alex Harvey, some of Bon's stuff, the tongue-in-cheek thing. He was a real personality."

Classic Rock tries to pin Way down and to get him to offer his precise memories of Bon's death. As we do so, Paul Chapman's name is mentioned for the first time.

"I got a phone call," Way recounts. "Paul Chapman [then UFO's guitarist] called me. He said: 'Pete, Bon's just died. The people – the police or whoever – need to tell the band.' I've got Angus and Malcolm's home numbers. So I thought, don't let Angus know; Malcolm's the person to tell first. So I gave Paul Chapman Malcolm's number. I got on quite well with them, so I had the numbers of where they were in London. And I really didn't want to [give the number to Chapman], because it's quite early in the morning when I got the phone call."

Here's where the popularly accepted version of the Bon Scott story takes a major detour. To recap: Alistair Kinnear said he discovered Bon's body in his

Bon and Angus had an electrifying presence on stage in AC/DC.

JORGEN ANGEL/REDFERNS/GETTY

car at 7.45 in the evening on Tuesday, February 19. Pete Way says that he was informed about Bon's death on the Tuesday morning. So what happened? How did Paul Chapman know so early that Bon had died?

Way: "Well… [coughs] you know… [voice tapers off]. But, you know, some people do fall asleep and choke in the car. Paul will probably… I've got to be very careful here again. Paul's one of them people who can have as many drinks as you like, and he'll do as many drugs as you like. Remember, we used to call him Tonka. But yeah, he was actually the one who called me early in the morning to say: 'Can you get me one of the band's numbers, because Bon's dead'. So I probably knew before anybody. But I don't know the actual situation."

Way adds: "With Bon there were no limits, so really and truly you don't know, do you? It can happen to any of us. These days I'm older and perhaps wiser, because I'll have a few drinks or whatever, and one night I might do a bit of coke. But at least I'm older and wiser; sometimes you're young and you ain't that wise."

"The guys in the pub could relate to Bon," says ex-AC/DC bassist Mark Evans. "He was a hard-arse."

PETER MAZEL/SUNSHINE/RETNA/PHOTOSHOT

A week after our conversation with Pete Way, *Classic Rock* tracked down former UFO guitarist Paul Chapman at his home in Florida. *Classic Rock* knows the Wales-born musician from way back, having first met him when he played guitar in 70s rockers Lone Star.

Chapman is still angry about having his guitar work deleted from Waysted's aforementioned new album, *Back From The Dead*. On his website he has even posted sound bites of his original work for the album, claiming it was rejected for no good reason. So, plainly, there is no love lost between Paul Chapman and Pete Way. Nevertheless, Chapman's recollections of Bon Scott's death follow on seamlessly from Way's. Chapman is convinced that he was one of the last people to have seen Bon alive. Bon's biographer, Clinton Walker, admitted he never interviewed Chapman for his book, explaining why the full account has never emerged until now: "I never spoke to Chapman," Walker says, "but in the interviews with him I've read he sheds no light, and I even doubt his claims of closeness. Therefore I was content to speak to the people who saw Bon on that very last day: his then girlfriend [Anna Baba], his old girlfriend [Silver Smith] and 'Alistair Kinnear'." (The quotes around 'Alistair Kinnear' are Walker's own.)

Be that as it may. *Classic Rock* asked Chapman straight out about his early-morning phone call to Pete Way and his request for the phone numbers of Angus and Malcolm Young so they could be informed of Bon's death. As we say, if the timing is accurate, then Chapman would have made his call several hours before Alistair Kinnear's 'discovery' of Bon's body in the Renault 5 outside the flat in East Dulwich in the evening of Tuesday, February 19, 1980.

"I'll tell you exactly what went down," Chapman responds eagerly. "We [UFO] were playing at Hammersmith. And Bon arrived; it was on the second or the third of our nights there. The guy who was with Bon that night was someone called Joe Bloe, an Australian guy. He changed his name by deed poll to Joe King, but his real name was Joe Bloe."

The actual dates of UFO's Hammersmith shows were February 3, 4, 5 and 7.

Chapman continues: "Joe used to work for me; he was my guitar tech for about six months. I remember how I met Joe. There was a flat in Hammersmith – it was Joe's place – and one of the guys there was a smack dealer. And I, er, used to go there. Joe was going out with someone called Silver Smith [Bon Scott's ex-girlfriend]. Silver Smith and Joe King – funny names, you know." (In Clinton Walker's Bon Scott book, there is also a character called 'Joe Furey' with UFO connections.)

"I remember when [names top British prog-rock musician] pulled up in a Rolls-Royce outside. The flat was on the second floor, and Joe King dangled the smack down – it was attached to a piece of rope, and he had a rock in the bag to weigh it down – and he dangled it through the sun roof of his Roller, and this guy just drove off."

Chapman returns to the subject at hand: "Anyway, Joe ended up working for me for quite a while, although he wasn't when the Bon thing happened. So some days after our Hammersmith gigs, just before Bon died, I met up again with Joe and Bon, and I said: 'Why don't you come back to my house?' I lived in Fulham, just off Wandsworth Bridge Road – I could look out the window and see the Young's brewery on one side and the Gordon's gin factory on the other. A perfect place to live. I said to Joe and Bon: 'Why don't you pay me a visit?' Joe said: 'We haven't got very much smack left'. And at that point Bon went off."

"AC/DC WERE LIKE A HURRICANE. IT WAS BETTER THAN UFO, AND WE HAD TO FOLLOW IT."

PETE WAY, UFO

The above events presumably occurred during the afternoon or early evening of Monday, February 18.

Chapman adds: "He [Bon] was actually going to get some more smack for us. [But] Bon never showed up. Bon never came back to my flat. After a long time waiting, I can remember Joe saying: 'I have to get back home'. Joe and Bon had rented some place to live in Bayswater or Maida Vale, somewhere like that, I can't quite remember where." [Chapman probably means Bon's flat in Victoria.]

So, were Joe King and Bon Scott living together at this time?

"Yes," Chapman affirms. "Joe was, like, Bon's minder. He was looking after ▷

him. So, as I say, Bon went off to wherever he went, and he said to me: 'I'll see you back at your place with the stuff'. Bon had my phone number, and he had all the directions of how to get to my flat in Fulham."

Here's where the time-difference factor kicks in big-time. Kinnear's claimed 7.45pm discovery of Bon Scot's corpse – on Tuesday, February 19, remember – contrasts sharply with Chapman's recollection of learning about the singer's death in the morning of that day.

Chapman reiterates: "Anyway, by seven o'clock in the morning [of February 19], Joe and me are still in my flat in Fulham. The sun comes up, and I say: 'I have to go to bed'. I say to Joe: 'I'll call you a minicab if you want'. And Joe says: 'No, they can take a while to arrive, I'll make my own way home'. And off he went."

Chapman's ex-roadie was totally wasted when he stepped into the morning light. "I went downstairs and opened the front door," the guitarist says, "and this winter sunshine comes blasting in. Joe was green. He was the colour of my fish tank."

Upon Joe King's departure, Chapman went back upstairs: "I didn't have much furniture, there were cushions on the floor and I fell asleep on them. At 10 or 11 o'clock [in the morning] the phone goes. It's Joe. He goes: 'Are you sitting down?' I go: 'I'm lying down, where you left me.' He says: 'I've got bad news. Bon is dead.'"

The phone line went quiet: "then I heard Joe crying his eyes out. He was losing it. I knew that Pete [Way] had AC/DC's numbers; Joe didn't have the numbers of anyone else in the band. Joe was back at this place he shared with Bon in central London [Victoria]. That was where he was phoning from. He was waiting for Bon to come home, because obviously Bon didn't come back to my house in Fulham.

"They'd just rented the place [in Victoria], and I can remember Joe saying: 'We've got a video and a telly and everything'. So I called Pete Way and he gave me AC/DC's numbers, and then I called Joe back at his and Bon's place. This was in central London, as I say; it definitely wasn't in East Dulwich [the location of Alistair Kinnear's flat]. I spoke to Pete, I phoned Joe and I gave him AC/DC's numbers."

So, after that, Joe King must have called the guys in the band. Chapman: "Yes. Or he told [manager] Peter Mensch. But I can remember Bon's old girlfriend, Silver, calling me up and saying: 'He's a cunt, that Peter Mensch'.

"The first thing that happened [after Bon's death] was the TV and the VCR went missing from Bon and Joe's house. People cleaned out the place. I said to Pete Way: 'Fuck, one minute Bon's here, the next he's gone, and then his telly's gone and whatever else he might have rented is gone'. It was like he got erased."

So, to *Classic Rock*'s $64,000 question: obviously UFO were going through a major heroin period 25 years ago; it sounds as if dealers were here, there and everywhere. But when Bon's death certificate was issued, it said the cause of death was 'acute alcoholic poisoning'. "Yeah," Chapman agrees. "And hypothermia." (In fact, there was no mention of hypothermia.) The death certificate, we repeat, said drugs weren't in Bon's system.

Chapman: "I don't think they were. I believe the reason Bon went to East Dulwich was he was going to get some smack. Maybe he couldn't score at the Music Machine. I don't know if it [the smack] was for us, or for us and him as well. I can never recall him being into that. He was just a hard drinker."

But Bon also had a craving for sugar: "His teeth were rotten," says Chapman. "He was always eating Mars Bars; AC/DC used to have Mars Bars on their tour rider. I've also seen Bon drink aftershave. Absolute truth. But I can never recall seeing him put anything in his mouth or up his nose; pills or smoking, nothing like that. But he drank like a wildman."

Classic Rock urges Chapman to reiterate his comments, just to make sure there's no doubt about what he's saying. We ask: so regardless of the fact that Bon had all these people who were into smack around him, you say that he would've abstained from indulging?

"I… er… yeah. I can say that I never, ever remember seeing Bon take drugs. I might be wrong. Maybe I just wasn't there at the time when he did. Or if he did. That whole thing was just a total, fucking baffling mess, it really was.

"How the fuck Bon got to Dulwich, I don't know. I can't believe they left him in the car. It was February; it was freezing cold. I had Calor Gas heaters in my flat and they were fucking cranking just to keep the place warm. And after all this went down I called Pete Way back and I said: 'Can you believe they left Bon outside in the car?' And Pete said: 'Who the fuck would leave him in a car?'"

On the subject of heroin, Clinton Walker's book adds: 'If there's ever been a suspicion Bon was more deeply involved in narcotics than it seemed, the fact is that he never really got into heroin. Certainly, though, he dabbled in it. On at least one occasion, in Melbourne in early

MARK EVANS
AC/DC BASS PLAYER '75-'77

Mark Evans joined AC/DC as bass player in March 1975 before his personality clashes with Angus Young led to his dismissal from the band in May 1977. Interview: Joe Matera.

WHAT IMPRESSIONS DID YOU HAVE OF BON WHEN YOU FIRST JOINED AC/DC?
My impression of him was already pretty well formed before I had met him. Though I knew of him from his Valentines days in the late 60s, it was with his tenure with Fraternity [that] my impression of him was that of a hippy version of Elvis Presley.

WHAT WAS YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH BON DURING YOUR STAY IN THE BAND?
It was always very, very good, and there were never any problems. Because he was older than all of us, like he was 28 and I was 18, he lived a life very separate from the rest of the band. and had his own sort of social scene away from the band. And though he had a very wide-ranging and energetic social life, he never let the band down in any way. He never, ever missed a gig.

WHAT DO YOU THINK WERE HIS ATTRIBUTES AS A FRONTMAN?
Just everything about his character, and that he was a very good rock'n'roll singer. There were plenty of good rock'n'roll singers around at the time but none could make the grade as Bon did. Chicks loved him because they thought he was a bit of a bad boy, and the guys loved him too. Especially the guys in the pubs we played in Melbourne, as they could relate to him because they thought he was a hard-arse. To them he was also just of the boys done good. He just related to both guys and girls.

DID YOU EVER THINK Bon WOULD BECOME THE ICON HE HAS BECOME AFTER HE DIED?
That's a hard question to answer because you don't really think in those terms. But in the fullness of time, I'm not really surprised he's held in the position that he's held. You really can't compare him to anybody; he was unique. The thing I really I think I'm more surprised about is the fact he hasn't really been recognised more for his lyrics. His lyrics were very wry, very funny and all very much tongue in cheek. If you go back and read them, they're really tremendous lyrics.

DID YOU EVER SENSE THAT BON'S LIFESTYLE WOULD CULMINATE IN HIS EARLY DEATH?
No, but I remember being with him a few times, where he sort of had a few drinks and passed out mainly due in part to him being heavily asthmatic. Though it was a shock when it did happen, certainly after the dust had settled, it was no surprise.

CAN YOU SHARE SOME STORIES ABOUT BON?
At one stage in the band's early days, Angus used to get dressed up as whole bunch of different characters that ranged from Super Angus to a Gorilla. Angus just wasn't just a schoolboy. Anyway one night we were down in Hobart and Angus had gone off stage to get into his gorilla suit and was then rolled out in a cage on stage. Suddenly Bon disappeared and we're all going: "Where the fuck did Bon go?" Then we heard this sort of Tarzan jungle cry and here is Bon coming out with this Tarzan lap-lap sort of thing on him. He had strung a rope up into the rafters, got on top of the PA and started swinging from it Tarzan style in front of the PA. It was so fuckin' funny. He would do these things like that all the time and he'd never tell us. Another time was when we performed *Baby Please Don't Go* live on *Countdown* (Australia's then answer to *Top Of The Pops*) and Bon had got dressed up as a schoolgirl. Again he didn't tell us. So here we were, being filmed live on television, and the music starts up and Bon's nowhere to be found, and we're all going: "Where the fuck is Bon?" As soon as his vocals are about to begin he comes out from behind the drums and hits the stage dressed as this schoolgirl. And it was like a bomb had gone off in the joint; it was pandemonium, everybody broke out in laughter. Bon had a wonderful sense of humour. He was the archetypal naughty boy.

CUT OUT: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

1975, he almost died of an overdose. But that, it seems, was enough to warn him off it, even though heroin would surround him… for the rest of his life.'

So, we asked Chapman, do you know who this Alistair Kinnear guy was?

"The name rings a bell" he replied. "Maybe it rings a bell from the reports. I never met him."

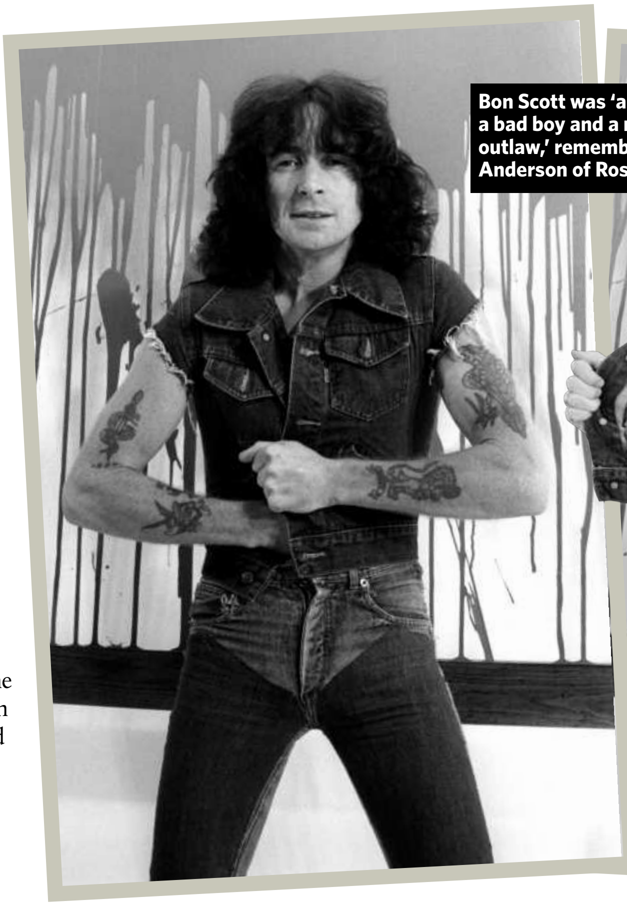
How does Chapman think Joe King – who left Chapman's flat in a drugged-out daze on the morning of Tuesday, February 19 – found out about Bon's death so quickly, and ostensibly before Kinnear?

Chapman: "I don't know. I have no clue. He [Joe] was a basket case on the phone. I'd just woken up. I think maybe the people that Bon went [to East Dulwich] with, whoever they were, maybe they might've had a phone number of where Bon was staying with Joe [in Victoria]. So they must've called Joe, and then Joe called me.

"Bon was found dead at five o'clock in the morning or something like that. Joe left my flat at seven and he called me at 10 or 11. He found out some time between those times. But I've no idea how."

Classic Rock's final words to Chapman are: so you're saying that Bon would happily buy drugs for people, and then give them out.

"He wanted to stay up and party," Chapman insists. "If that's what kept us up, then he'd be up for it. Bon just wanted to keep the party going."



Bon Scott was 'a buccaneer, a bad boy and a rock'n'roll outlaw,' remembers Angry Anderson of Rose Tattoo.

FIN COSTELLO/REDFERNS/GETTY

Nothing is ever straightforward when a rock star dies. There's always no end of conjecture and confusion. And many glaring anomalies and answered questions about Bon Scott's death remain.

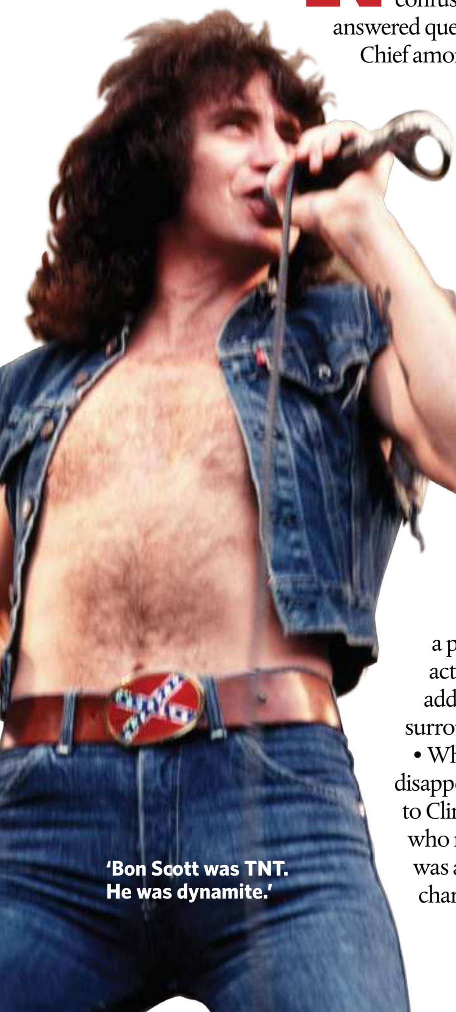
Chief among them are:

• When was Bon's body actually discovered? When did the police first find out? *Classic Rock* spoke to East Dulwich police station in Lordship Lane, who referred us to the Metropolitan Police press bureau. We were told that no information was available because Scott's was a 'non-suspicious death'. We then spoke to Southwark Coroner's Court and asked if we could gain access to their records. We were told to submit a request in writing, which we did promptly. It was subsequently rejected.

A spokesman told us: "Unfortunately you are not what we would call 'a properly interested person'. That would be a parent, a spouse, a child or someone acting on behalf of the deceased." He added: "There is still sensitivity surrounding this case."

• Who is Alistair Kinnear, and why did he disappear from sight? We posed this question to Clinton Walker, Bon Scott's biographer, who replied cryptically: "Alistair, I believe, was another guise used by one of the characters already in my book – and I did try to very gently imply that. I have met this fellow, but I've left it at that. What I'm saying is, I met the guy who might have been 'Kinnear', but that feeling is based on no real evidence, just a hunch." Walker was unable to track down the 'real' Kinnear for his book.

• Alistair Kinnear – who some claim was a rock journalist, not a musician – may have changed his identity. The late writer Mark Putterford, who raised the issue of heroin being involved in Scott's death, was reputedly aware of Kinnear's new guise. A source told *Classic Rock* that, at the time of Putterford's death 10 years ago, Putterford was planning to approach Kinnear with regard to doing an updated version of *Shock To The System* (Putterford's AC/DC book that explores the heroin angle). One of the things that Putterford was planning to ask Kinnear was that if he was sober enough to drive across London, how come he was so inebriated that he slept solidly until the evening of Tuesday, February 19?



'Bon Scott was TNT. He was dynamite.'

After Bon's death, AC/DC closed ranks. Angus and Malcolm Young don't often speak about their old singer, who was replaced by Brian Johnson for 1980's *Back In Black* album. On the occasions when they do, their reminiscences are often anecdotal and humorous rather than heartfelt and emotional. That's no criticism, it may be the best way they can find to deal with their grief.

Australian singer Jimmy Barnes, of Cold Chisel fame, recently told *Classic Rock*: "Nobody was more hurt than the AC/DC boys at the time, because they lost a great friend and a fine singer. A lesser band would have collapsed, but they came back and went on to make so many more huge records. Bon was an awful hard man to replace."

Bruce Elder of the *Sydney Morning Herald* (formerly the London correspondent for *Rolling Stone*) spoke to Angus Young a few days after Bon's death.

Elder asked: "Who in the band was closest to Bon?" Angus replied: "We all were. You see, we were on the road for 10 or 11 months every year, and the rest of the time we were in the studio recording the next album. We were all close to Bon."

Elder concluded in his article: 'It was one of those moments when you suddenly realise the line between truth and myth in the rock'n'roll lifestyle. These guys were bonded by hard work and the desire to succeed.'

This tortured tale will continue to run and run, as it has done since his death. So let's bring things to a temporary conclusion with a few words from Bon Scott, who once summed himself up with the classic quote: "They say to me: 'Are you AC, or DC?' And I say: 'Neither, I'm the lightning!'"

And like a flash he was gone.

WELL

IN THIS LIFETIME

Rejoining Guns N' Roses. Lemmy's last days. The #MeToo minefield. Talking to your kids about drugs. In 2018 **Slash** had a lot to get off his chest. And in this blockbusting interview with *Classic Rock*, that's what he did...

Words: **Scott Rowley** Portraits: **Ross Halfin**

You know where you are? You're in Bordeaux, baby – and it's fuck-all like the jungle.

"These have got to be the happiest, most chilled-out French people I've ever met," says Slash, looking out of the window of the hotel. "There were people out drinking in the streets until four in the morning. It's like no one's got work to go to."

It's midweek in the wine capital of the world, and in the bars of Bordeaux the French are cheering as Germany get knocked out of a World Cup that France will later win. This is the latest stop-over for what is literally the biggest show on earth: Guns N' Roses' Not In This Lifetime tour. Back in April, *Billboard* revealed that the band's reunion tour was the fourth-biggest tour *of all time* – grossing $480 million so far. That was before they played 19 shows across Europe this summer.

It's been a while since we caught up with him – four years, in fact – and we're here to find out what's going on in the world of Slash.

Because *so much* has happened in the intervening years.

In 18 months between 2014-16 he played more than 150 gigs all over the world. His former Velvet Revolver bandmate Scott Weiland died. Chris Cornell, who sang on Slash's debut album, killed himself. David Bowie, who Slash first met aged eight, died. Lemmy, a long-time close friend, passed away after a long battle.

In his personal life, Slash got divorced from his wife of 13 years, Perla, and rekindled a relationship with a woman he went out with when he was 25. Oh, and somewhere along the way Guns N' fuckin Roses got back together.

Slash, the master of understatement, Mr Laid-Back himself shrugs. "I've been busy," he says.

There are people who are worried about our conversation. Before I can speak to Slash I have to sign a contract that says that if anything goes wrong – if some kind of shit hits the fan because of what I write – and GN'R lose money, then *Classic Rock* carries the can. This is no small thing when you're dealing with the fourth-biggest-earning tour *of all time*.

> **"Having an opportunity to go out and play... the fact that I'm able to do what it is that I love to do, that's living the dream."**

There is paranoia around. The Not In This Lifetime tour took a lifetime to put together, and no one wants to be the one to fuck it up. You might not have noticed, but Guns N' Roses haven't really talked to *anyone* since they re-formed. They haven't done an interview.

Now Slash has a solo album coming, and so the burden has fallen to him. What will be said? What if I ask the tough questions? What if I make things awkward, open old GN'R wounds?

And then there's Slash. By his own admission, he's not much of a talker.

"I'm definitely not any kind of orator," he says. "I don't, er, I don't want to be somebody… I can't. I'm just not a good speaker in general, as far as like being someone who has a lot to communicate verbally. It's just not my thing."

Does that frustrate him?

"I don't know, maybe," he says. Then, fuck it, he changes his mind: "No, I don't give a shit."

Does he take that frustration and channel it into his guitar playing?

"Yeah, I mean, guitar playing is that for me; it's an extension of myself, it's a way to express myself that I can't do in any other sort of arena. The guitar is a release for me.

"I just love the fact that I can go and play every day. I do have frustrations in the fact that I cannot fucking put up a good fucking verbal argument with anybody for any length of time, but I just don't have it in me," he says, and his lips go into a sneer. "But I could knock you about with a guitar for a little bit."

In conversation, Slash can seem cagey, maybe even distrustful – a guy who keeps his cards close to his chest. With his reckless years behind him – and his were far more reckless than most – you might even think that sober Slash is a bit of a control freak; a private guy who doesn't give up much of himself. ▷

"It's rock and roll, it doesn't take a hell of a lot of, like, board meetings and shit to get a song together. It's either good or it's not."

Having interviewed him a few times over the years, that's definitely what I thought. And then something happened that made me think about Slash differently.

On December 19, 2016, the company that owned *Classic Rock* (and its sister magazines *Metal Hammer* and *Prog*) went bust. Staff at offices in Hamilton, Scotland, and London were called to a floor meeting and told to gather their stuff and leave, their services were no longer required. The company, TeamRock, had been liquidated and staff wouldn't be paid for December. At the Hamilton office, the administrators were literally changing the locks on the doors as staff left.

Two days later, I was at home, shell-shocked. I'd worked at *Classic Rock* since 2004. I had no clue what to do next. Christmas decorations hang half-heartedly around the house and I'm cooking dinner for my kids when the phone rings – the home number; the only people who ring on that are our parents and cold callers. I pick up.

"Hey, Scott?" says a soft American voice. "It's Slash. What the fuck's going on, man?"

And so, while I'm frying chicken for my kids, I tell Slash all about what happened, about the series of monumental management fuck-ups that led to TeamRock going bust.

There were many kind gestures in the following weeks, not least of which was the £80,000-plus raised by the public for the TeamRock staff. But Slash calling me at home – a small personal gesture, but one he didn't have to do – was one of the standouts.

He followed it up, too. A month or so later, with *Classic Rock* up and running again – bought by Future publishing, our previous home – he

Hatchets buried, differences put to one side, it's all smiles in the reunited Guns N' Roses.

KATARINA BENZOVA/PRESS x2

"Now that we've actually mended fences and gotten back together and done this, we're going to keep it together." Slash on GN'R

dropped me an email: "Hey," he said, "just checking in. How's everything working out?"

It might seem from the outside that we're all friends with the rock stars we write about, but let me tell you that *this does not happen*.

"I was sort of devastated when I heard," he says now. "It was like, fuck, there's not really many magazines left and I had a relationship with you guys. It was really sad. So I was really happy that it turned around like it did…"

Sure, I say, but you didn't have to call…

He shrugs, like it's nothing, like rock stars phone guys like me all the time. "We've known each other for a long time," he says.

We have. Covering the past and continuing adventures of Guns N' Roses has probably been the story of *Classic Rock*'s lifetime. The first issue of the mag was published more than a decade after the release of their debut album *Appetite For Destruction*, but that didn't prevent the band being on the cover of that first issue and many (some would say too many) issues thereafter.

Classic Rock's first permanent editor, Mick Wall, was one of the *'punks in the press'* named in the *Use Your Illusion* track *Get In The Ring*, which brought him closer to the story than most. Our photographer Ross Halfin did the first ever magazine shoot of the band.

Then there was the aftermath: throughout the 90s and the 00s, Slash, Duff, Adler, Izzy, Axl, Sorum, Gilby et al were all working musicians – touring, releasing records, falling in and out of trouble and giving interviews all the while.

Classic Rock was there when Velvet Revolver formed *and* when they split. We *released* all of Slash's previous solo albums. We followed the story tenaciously, passionately.

Sometimes, maybe we went too far. (So far, in fact, that I got letters from Axl's lawyers on at least two occasions.) But that's The GN'R Effect for you. They were the band that went too far – and it was infectious.

"I've been busy," he says. Yeah, just a bit. From 2014 through most of 2016 Slash was on tour with The Conspirators, 150-plus dates, writing for the next record, working on "movie projects" and so on. And then…

"And then Axl and I talked," he says, "and that was something that came totally out of the blue, totally unexpected. We talked and managed to alleviate some of this negativity that had been brewing.

"Not between us," he stresses, "because we had never actually spoken. It was sort of perpetuated through the media and stuff, and it just became a running thing – the biggest rivalry or whatever. So it was really nice to talk."

The ice broken, after a few phone calls, Slash and Axl met in person. They'd been getting offers to re-form for the Coachella festival for ages, but had never even considered it. The Coachella Valley Music And Arts Festival, in Indio, California, had developed a reputation for putting on reunions: Jane's Addiction reunited to play there in 2001, Siouxsie & The Banshees made a return in 2002, Iggy & The Stooges in 2003, the Pixies in 2004… you get the idea.

When the two of them met, Axl said: "You know, Coachella would be sort of fun, wouldn't it?"

The plan was just to do two dates at Coachella and some warm-up gigs, but…

"We just had a fucking insane blast doing it," says Slash, "that, you know, one thing led to another and the next thing you know we had booked a leg of a tour, and it just kept adding up and adding up."

And now that little get-together is the fourth-biggest tour of all time. ▷

"It's been quite a fucking positive experience," he nods.

Slash got his nickname from Seymour Cassel, a character actor famous for working with John Cassavetes and in later life for appearing in Wes Anderson movies such as *Rushmore* and *The Royal Tenenbaums*. As a kid in LA, Slash hung out with Cassel's son Matt and, one day, Seymour just started calling the young Saul Hudson Slash. It stuck. No one knew what the fuck it meant but it sounded cool. Years later, on GN'R's *Use Your Illusion* tour, Slash bumped into Seymour in Paris and asked him where he'd got the name from. Why 'Slash'?

Cassel told him the name embodied what he saw as Slash's "sense of hustle". "His reason for calling me Slash," the guitarist wrote in his autobiography, "was that I never stood still for more than five minutes. He was right. I've always been coming or going more than I've ever stayed still. I am perpetually in motion, often saying goodbye while saying hello, and Seymour summed that quality up in a word."

He's Slash in the sense of 'and/or' or 'yes/no' – not slash as in knife wound. He's not a split, he's a *join*, a conjunction. He's not one thing, he's both. A slash is used to link alternatives: black/white, English/American. He's a walking paradox, a duality. He's a stereotype that defies categorisation. In maths the slash symbol is called a separatrix, the boundary separating two modes of behaviour. In the past he didn't see boundaries.

The word 'slash' has its roots in the old French word 'esclachier', meaning 'to break'. He's been breaking things his whole life – records, rules, bones, hearts. But his appetite for destruction was matched only by his work ethic.

On the surface he's chilled, laid back, so unassuming. But take a look at his work rate and it tells a different story: he never stops. Some rock stars, coming off what will surely be the highest-grossing tour in history, would probably, y'know, *take a holiday*. Instead, Slash has been prepping an album and can't wait to get back into it. The fact that the album has been finished for months and it isn't out yet has been driving Slash mad.

"I wonder how actors do it," he says: "Finish a project and then you can't release it for another four months or three months or whatever."

Writing for the new Slash Featuring Myles Kennedy & The Conspirators album began towards the end of the World On Fire tour – an 18-month schlep around the world – writing on the road, jamming at sound checks. And then Guns N' Roses happened. Where other people would have given up on the solo career, as soon as Guns had a break – between January and June this year – Slash and his co-conspirators Myles, Todd Kerns, Brent Fitz and Frank Sidoris (in on the recording of an album for the first time) got back together and started revisiting those earlier ideas.

Slash bought a rehearsal room with a 16-track board a few miles from his house. When the band reconvened, on the very first session they wrote a brand-new song straight off the bat. "The first chords that we hit, after all that time, was something just to warm up," says Slash, "and it became a whole new song, *Mind Your Manners*."

"I've spent the last... since two thousand and fking eight or whatever, avoiding Guns N' Roses questions, and my life has been a lot better because of it."**

And then they went in the studio and knocked out an album. "Any kind of solo project that I do," he says, "for me personally, is a quick, fucking hash it out and not too much thought involved, bam, done. It's rock and roll, it doesn't take a hell of a lot of, like, board meetings and shit to get a song together. It's either good or it's not, you know?"

The album, *Living The Dream*, is out on September 21. Twelve songs with big choruses, crunching riffs and a whole load of guitar playing, it's an album that sounds like it was made quickly – in a good way. No board meetings, no bullshit, just the kind of ballsy anthems that will keep arenas across the world bouncing for the next few months.

They threw it down quickly, Slash rejoined Guns for this 19-date European tour, "and then I'll get home and then hook up with the guys and go out in September, release the record, then it's Guns N' Roses in Asia, and then come back and do Conspirators, and it's going to be like that. That's my life."

You don't have to work that hard, you know. Does anyone ever tell you that?

"I don't mind working hard," he says. "What's exciting for me is to actually have something to do. It's exciting to know that there's something I'm doing tomorrow, as opposed to, like [twiddles thumbs], 'Ah, hmm…'"

Because he's *Slash*: one thing finishes/another begins.

The only time he can remember having nothing to do was in the period between Velvet Revolver and his first solo record ("the one with all the singers").

"That period right there I was going, 'Fuck. *Now* what am I going to do?' Because, er, there was no chance Velvet was getting back together. I don't know if you know this, but when Velvet Revolver first started I was knee-deep in doing a solo record. I was playing with Steve Gorman on drums. Actually that was where *Fall To Pieces* started…"

There's an internet rumour that you were going to put together a band with Chris Cornell around then.

"I don't know if that was ever a reality," he says. "I didn't even know that *was* a rumour. I did work with Chris on the solo record, but I never had any prospects of doing a band with him.

"Anyway, I was back to that solo stuff. Back in that place where I really didn't know what I was going to be doing. So that's when I embarked on the solo record, and then I met Myles, and Myles turned into a relationship that's spanned eight years now.

"When we're on the road, I write the entire time. That's what I do in the dressing room or in my hotel rooms. I'll play him something, or we'll record it at sound check, and he keeps all that stuff and he works on it while we're on the road or while he's out with Alter Bridge or whatever he's doing."

When Slash went out with Guns N' Roses, he noticed that his writing began to change: "When Guns started doing its thing, then the kind of writing that I was doing was actually more tailored towards Guns, because that was the environment I was in. But then we took the break and I started thinking about doing the Conspirators record.

"When it comes down to it, a riff is a riff. It could work in either context. But with The Conspirators, anything I come up with, Myles will come up with something, and that's why it's such a diverse record.

"With Guns, you have no idea where that's going to go either, so it's really sort of hard to focus on one or the other. But I feel like while I'm out with Guns I'm thinking about Guns stuff. When I'm out with Conspirators I'm thinking of Conspirators. I've been doing The Conspirators for, like, eight years now. So there's a certain kind of rhythm that I've gotten into with doing that.

"With Guns, we haven't sort of… we've just started to touch the surface of what that's going to all be, so I haven't really fallen into that groove yet. So right now there's more of a question mark around that than with Conspirators."

Wait: Have you announced this, that you're writing for a Guns record?

"Well, it's not been announced because there's nothing official, so there's nothing to talk ▷

ROSS HALFIN

Appetite for everything: Guns N' Roses at the beginning of the road to superstardom, doing their first photo shoot.

“Everything about that record [*Appetite*] is wrong for what was going on in music at the time.”

Slash with Lemmy: "One of the greatest friends to have, and one of the greatest mentors."

GETTY

about. I think everybody thinks it's a good idea, and everybody would like to do it, and there's no shortage of ideas, from everybody involved, but we've been so busy on the road there hasn't really been time to go in and sit down and go: 'Okay, we're going to make a record.'"

A few weeks before Guns N' Roses played Download, the Rolling Stones toured the UK. It made people ask the question: 'When the Stones retire, who's going to fill their shoes?' Guns N' Roses could easily do what the Stones are doing now: the big, world-conquering tour, an album every few years, room in the schedule for solo projects.

"Well, we'll see what happens," he says. "I mean, I have no prospects. Now that we've actually mended fences and gotten back together and done this, we're going to keep it together. Because all the bullshit that we'd had that sort of caused all the shit back in the nineties, there was a lot of outside influence on that, and so now that that's sort of eliminated we're just left to our own devices. We get along fucking great.

"So I think we're going to go well on into the future. I mean, Axl's got a ton of shit that he recorded already, so we're just going to get in there and just start getting into that thing, and then if we do a record and then do a tour, I could see that cycle going on endlessly."

There's a lot of conversation about kids not being into rock music these days. When you're making a new album, do you feel under pressure to do something to grab kids' attention?

"I don't. I just can't be bothered with trying to figure it all out, you know? I mean, somewhere in your mind you're obviously conscious of the dynamics of what's happening at the moment with music, and with the industry itself, and also with where rock'n'roll is at. But there's not a hell of a lot you can do about it. Even if you were to set a goal, to go: 'I'm going to change rock', chances are you're going to fail.

"You've just got to do what you do best, put your utmost integrity into it, make an effort and try and do it for yourself."

"So you've just got to do what you do best, put your utmost integrity into it, make an effort and try and do it for yourself. That's really where it comes down to: you're doing all this for yourself, to satisfy some inner yearning to do something that you want to hear, or just to be whatever it is that you want to be, you know? But to think that you're important enough to try and influence the entire industry is sort of a stretch."

Some would say that Guns N' Roses did it with *Appetite For Destruction*.

"Yeah," he says, "but no one would fucking have expected that. I mean, granted, it's a good record, and there's a uniqueness to Axl's whole delivery and the songs, but it's got very unorthodox arrangements. Everything about that record is wrong for what was going on in music at the time. So I still can't find the one thing that hit that nerve and created this longevity. You don't bother trying to figure it out. Just be thankful that you were able to make a record that fucking reached that many people. Because it was such an honest record."

Maybe that was what connected with people. "That could be it," he says. "But sometimes I look out from the stage at that sea of people and wonder exactly how it's transcended generations at this point, you know? It's a trip."

I put a call-out on Facebook and Instagram for people to share their experiences of meeting Slash, and got a load of stories from people amazed at his kindness and thoughtfulness.

Betty fell ill the week that she was supposed to go and see Slash in concert, meaning that she missed out on the gig *and* the meet-and-greet she'd paid for. Five years later, Slash heard about it and got her tickets and backstage passes so she could have their own personal meet-and-greet.

When Alissa was just starting out as a photographer, Slash spotted her in the photo pit with her "cheap crappy camera". He took pity on her, and posed just for her for a minute or so, leaning into her lens, to help her get a shot.

Robert took his son, a big Slash fan, to see Velvet Revolver at Hammersmith. There was a reception afterwards, and when they got in they found Slash rowing with the organisers. Robert's son wanted a photo of himself with Slash, so nervously Robert interrupted the argument to ask. "In the middle of the aggression," Robert says, "he turned to us, smiled and said: 'Yes, of course.'" He had a photo taken, chatted with the kid about guitars, and then went back to his argument.

"He reminds me of Lemmy," says Gina Giambalvo-Glockler, the partner of Saxon drummer Nigel Glockler, who has a story of Slash taking time out at a festival to come and say hi to her daughter. "He's a complete bad-ass yet always thoughtful. We need more people like this!"

"Lemmy was one of my all-time favourite fucking human beings," says Slash, who spoke at Kilmister's funeral. "We got to be friends back in 1987, when we first came over here, when Guns played those Marquee dates."

Slash hung out during the sessions for Motörhead's *Rock'N'Roll* album, drinking with Lemmy at London rock bars like the Intrepid Fox and the St Moritz. They became friends – "good drinking buddies and whatnot" – and Slash appeared on *I Ain't No Nice Guy* and *You Better Run* on Motörhead's *March Or Die* album in 1992. Much later, Lemmy appeared the track *Doctor Alibi* on Slash's debut album, which featured a classic Lemmy response to the diagnosis of his failing ⊳

Slash shot exclusively for *Classic Rock*, July 2018.

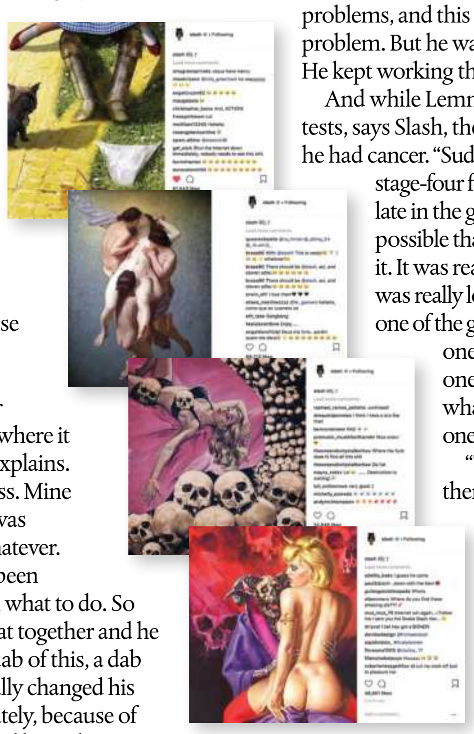
health: *'I went to see the doctor/ He said you're pretty sick/ You got some real bad habits/You'd better stop right quick… Don't you know that I feel alright/Doin' what I do/I ain't gonna toe the line/Not till I turn blue…'*

"When he got sick, it turned out that what he was suffering from initially was the same thing that I had been," says Slash, "which was this cardiomyopathy thing." (The British Heart Foundation describes cardiomyopathy as "a disease of the heart muscle which affects its size, shape and structure".) "It's where your heart enlarges to the point where it has nowhere to go," Slash explains. "Which was just from excess. Mine was from alcohol, and his was probably from speed or whatever.

"So I told him that I had been through that and I told him what to do. So we sort of went through that together and he actually did pretty well. A dab of this, a dab of that, but he was… he really changed his whole thing. But unfortunately, because of his age, all the things that had been dormant – with the amount of chemicals he was taking that shut all that shit from happening – all of a sudden surfaced. So he had a lot of kidney problems, and this problem and that problem. But he was a tough motherfucker. He kept working through it."

And while Lemmy was having all these tests, says Slash, they never discovered that he had cancer. "Suddenly they go: you've got stage-four fucking cancer. And that late in the game it was really not even possible that he was going to survive it. It was really, really sad. To me, it was really losing somebody that was one of the greatest friends to have, and one of the greatest mentors, one of the greatest pillars of what rock'n'roll is to me. Just one really sweet motherfucker.

"There's so many guys out there that think you have to, you know, wear your leather jacket and be the tough guy, be rude and a fucking slob and break shit, to be rock'n'roll. And Lemmy dispelled all that because he was a perfect fucking gentleman. Very considerate and polite to everybody around him, and yet he was as hard-core a fucking rock'n'roller as you're ever going to find."



A selection of posts from Slash's Instagram.

"Axl's been fucking amazing. He's been so professional that it blows my mind."

The GN'R live set includes a few tributes to fallen friends. *Witchita Lineman* was a tip of the cap to Glen Campbell, while Soundgarden's *Black Hole Sun* was added as a tribute to Chris Cornell. "It just became something that we don't feel comfortable taking out of the set now," Slash says. Their epic versions of *Layla* and *Wish You Were Here*, meanwhile, are in there just there because they like playing them. "There's no message there," he says. "It would be brilliant if I had a real reason, but there isn't."

People are always looking for meaning in what Guns N' Roses do. One difference between GN'R of the 80s and 90s and today's incarnation is the rise of social media. There were always rumours and scandal surrounding Guns N' Roses, but now blog sites, social media and web forums have taken it to a new level.

"I'm on social media for marketing," he says. "I mean, to promote gigs or to promote a record. You can talk to fans in a direct way that you couldn't before."

On Instagram, Slash's feed is a continuously entertaining stream of garish smut and comical horror gifs. "My Instagram is just me jerking off." (Is it actually him who posts? "Oh yeah," he says with a grin. "Who else is going to do that shit?") But he's careful not to get sucked in; he doesn't read any of the comments. "It's too much," he says. "I don't want to be in that world where you're just glued to what everybody else thinks and everybody else has to say about stuff.

"It's hard, but myself and Duff, and a lot of guys I work with, none of us go down that path, and everybody else we know does. That's where I get all my information from.

"The depths to which people go in social media… This is a phenomenon that has changed society completely. It's deep, man. It's a huge outlet for cowards, a fucking horrible way for people to distance themselves and to get further away from being able to communicate directly.

"It's craziness, you know? Especially around a band like Guns. People tell me about [what people are saying] all the time, and I don't even want to know about it, because it's just too much. It's overwhelming to me."

Almost to illustrate the point, I mention the rumour that Slash's new partner, Meegan Hodges, and her friend (and Axl's ex-) Erin Everly, somehow helped get Guns N' Roses back together.

"Oh God, no," he says. "See, this is what we don't want to get into. Because there's so much bullshit talk out there. Erin had nothing to do with anything. Are you saying that Meegan and Erin got Guns N' Roses back together?"

The rumour came from Mick Wall's Guns N' Roses book *The Last Of The Giants*. Mick wrote that Meegan somehow started the conversation.

"I haven't to spoken to Mick in ages so he

Slash Featuring Myles Kennedy And The Conspirators: (l to r) Brent Fitz, Slash. Myles Kennedy, Frank Sidoris, Todd Kerns.

PRESS

doesn't know shit about anything," he says. "I'm sorry, Mick, but… Because no one [in Guns] is doing any press, no one wants to talk about anything personal. I've spent the last… since two thousand and fucking eight or whatever, avoiding Guns N' Roses questions, and my life has been a lot better because of it. So I am not about to get into that now, you know. But no, there's no truth to that."

Well, let's settle something else while we're here. For years, Guns N' Roses have been famous for appearing on stage late. Since you've rejoined, that problem seems to have been cured. What's the difference? How is this Guns N' Roses getting on stage on time?

"I don't know, man," he says. "Axl's been fucking amazing. He's been so professional that it blows my mind. I mean, he's always been professional, but obviously we had some issues with a lot of different things back in the day, but there was a lot of reasons that I wasn't really aware of… You know, there was such a divide-and-conquer thing going on around us by somebody who will remain mentionless, that we never could get to the core of that problem.

"When we went to do those Coachella gigs, in the back of my mind I was wondering how this was all going to go. But Axl's been fucking unreal. We've been playing for the last almost two years without a fucking hitch. No matter what's been thrown at him.

"But it's not because of anything that was said. I think there's a rumour going around that said that I would quit [if the band were late to the stage], or that there was some contract. None of that. There was nothing even mentioned about it."

The day before our interview, Tool frontman Maynard James Keenan's reputation was on trial on Twitter: a woman had anonymously claimed that the singer had raped her when she was seventeen. Has the #MeToo movement affected the music business?

"I just love the fact that I can go and play every day."

"It's a good question," he says. "I think the Me Too Movement is definitely justified – it's actually way overdue." But obviously, he says, it's complicated "in the context of being in a fucking rock and roll band. Fortunately, I'm taken, so I'm not dealing with all that, but I have to admit there were times I looked into my past and [as if he's talking to himself]: 'Well, that was consensual.'

"I never had a working relationship with anybody that I was, you know, trying to pressure into having sex or anything.

"The problem is that you could be falsely accused of something, but it almost doesn't matter – it's out there. Even if you were to get your name cleared, the damage is already done. And that's pretty sad.

"Hopefully the plus side of it is that women will be treated more respectfully, especially in positions where they're working under people who are tremendously powerful. Because I know how that one used to work: rich guys with a lot of money and a lot of power felt completely enabled to get whatever they wanted, you know? So hopefully this first wave will sort of even out and people will just start to treat each other a little bit more respectfully."

And he says he's not a good talker.

What's the worst thing about getting old?

"I don't have issue with it. I hate people who bitch about their age all the time, because it just makes them old, you know. It does."

Slash's eldest son is 15 and in a band – he's already going out gigging, and the band ▷

have recorded a three-song demo – and sometimes that makes him feel old.

"The teenage generation does not understand or relate – or want to be too close to – the older generation," he says. "There's a definite separation where it's them against us. It doesn't matter how cool you are, it doesn't matter what you've accomplished, it doesn't matter what wisdom you have to share, it doesn't matter where you've been, who you've met, you're still an old fucker and you don't understand."

He remembers his mum's boyfriend getting into the likes of Elvis Costello and Devo and saying that Led Zeppelin were dinosaurs and the new wave was the future. "He was twenty-three, and I thought: 'You're fucking old!'" he says, laughing. "I'll never forget that moment."

Years later Slash was the other end of it. He was hanging out with Ronnie Wood, staying at his house for a while, and Ronnie's daughter Leah was dating this kid who was into The Gorillaz. "And he was disgusted at the Rolling Stones and Guns N' Roses and all those old bands. He wouldn't look us in the eye. It was just a really uncomfortable scene at the house because of this kid. He had this genuine distaste, the way punk rockers did for ELO or Emerson, Lake And Palmer back in the day. So it is just what it is."

And what about when it comes to talking to his kids about drugs? How does he deal with that minefield?

He groans. "Well, I wrote that stupid book," he says. "When I was doing book tours for the book, I was asked more than a dozen times: 'What about when your kids read it?' I said: 'My kids are never going to read it. They're never gonna be interested to see what dad had to say about anything.'

"But my eldest turned around one day and decided to read that fucking book. So now, any time I have anything to say to him about school or work, or whatever it is that he doesn't necessarily want to hear, he can fucking fire back at me: 'Well, in your book you said…'

"But the drugs thing is a real issue. I had a lot of freedom growing up. My parents didn't know what I was up to for the most part, and they were so liberal; in the sixties and seventies, that whole mind-set was so different. But with kids now you really are way more aware of their surroundings and where they are and where they've been. You really keep a watchful eye over them, compared to when I was a kid.

"The drugs thing is what it is. You've just got to sort of steer them in the right direction, but you can't be the fucking gestapo about it because you have to always remember back to when you were a kid and people were telling you 'no', you went in the opposite direction. The other thing is that most of the drugs nowadays don't actually come from God's earth. How good a chemist do you think Brian the fucking drug dealer is? The guy didn't even graduate from junior high."

"Guitar playing is an extension of myself. It's a way to express myself that I can't do in any other sort of arena."

Happiness is Les Paul and a warm amp.

So there he is. Thirteen years clean and sober, back in his old band, touring the world on one of the biggest-selling tours of all time. He's in a new relationship, with four kids between them, and he's got the freedom to do his movie projects and make solo albums. It's worked out alright, hasn't it? Like his new album's title, he really is living the dream.

"Just to get one thing straight," he says, "the title, *Living The Dream*, has nothing to do with that. It was totally about this current state of global unrest. It was a tongue-in-cheek sort of joke. I'm not one to advocate politics, but I have to take little stabs at it where I can, as innocuously as possible.

"I mean, if you were to sit there and put any news channel on right now and spend a good two hours watching it, that's when the sarcastic 'living the dream' statement comes to mind. *World On Fire* was similar.

"But at the same time, for me personally, you know, in essence that's true. I know it sounds corny, or gratuitous, but I mean, yeah, I get that. There is some truth to that…"

Once when he was still at school, Slash fell asleep in class during a discussion about stereotypes. The teacher woke him, this scruffy kid in jeans and leather jacket, and started quizzing him in front of the whole class. Was he a musician? What instrument did he play? What kind of music? Slash/Saul told him. "Notice, class," the teacher said gleefully. "This young man is the *perfect example* of a stereotype." Slash got up, flipped the teacher's desk over and left the school forever.

Don't judge him too quickly.

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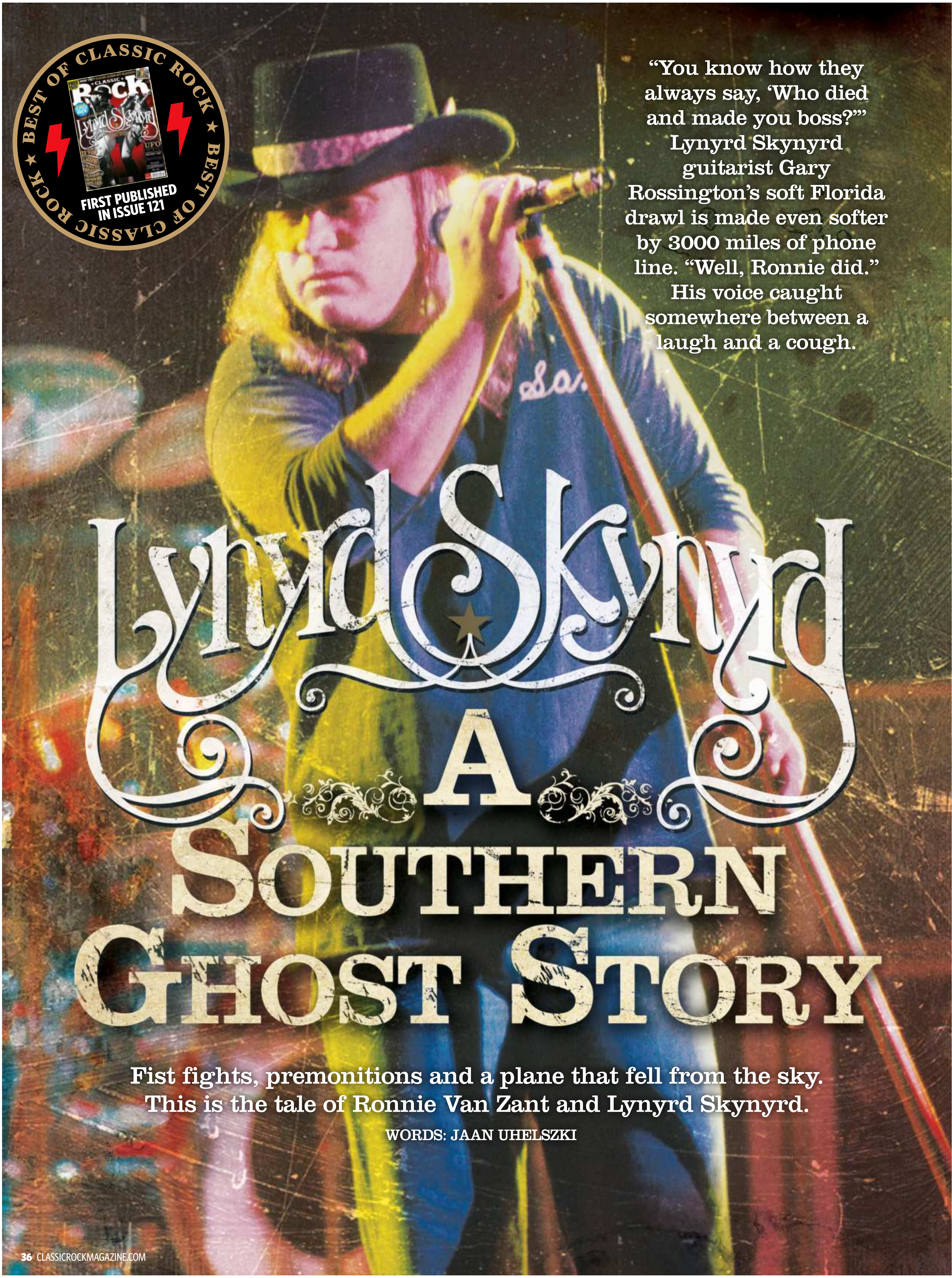

BEST OF CLASSIC ROCK ★ BEST OF CLASSIC ROCK ★

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Lynyrd Skynyrd
A Southern Ghost Story

Fist fights, premonitions and a plane that fell from the sky. This is the tale of Ronnie Van Zant and Lynyrd Skynyrd.

WORDS: JAAN UHELSZKI

"You know how they always say, 'Who died and made you boss?'" Lynyrd Skynyrd guitarist Gary Rossington's soft Florida drawl is made even softer by 3000 miles of phone line. "Well, Ronnie did." His voice caught somewhere between a laugh and a cough.

GETTY

Rossington's broken bones healed long ago, but they still ache when the weather turns cold or rainy. The pain, the scars, the metal rod in one arm – frequent reminders of October 20, 1977, the day Lynyrd Skynyrd's plane went down near McComb, Mississippi.

Among the dead, lead singer Ronnie Van Zant. Guitarist Steve Gaines. Steve's sister Cassie, one of the Honkettes – Skynyrd's backing vocalists. Road manager Dean Kilpatrick and the aircraft's two pilots.

Rossington doesn't need aches and pains to remind him of that day – it's something that will haunt him forever.

"I used to send flowers to the graves every October 20th for about 10 years. And then Judy [Van Zant, Ronnie's widow] told me, 'Just quit. Because people just steal them the same day.' It doesn't hurt and freak me out like it used to, but it's in the back of my mind and hard all that day. Right around the evening time when it happened, that's when it really gets weird, and [my wife] Dale leaves me alone."

Rossington and the rest of the band and crew – 20 in all – survived their injuries but struggled for years with the aftermath. Drug addiction. Paralyzing car wrecks. Divorce. Suicide. Murder. Accusations of sexual and spousal abuse… It seems that some terrible curse was determined to lay its claim on the surviving members.

No one who survived that day can forget that Van Zant, then 29, had repeatedly proclaimed that he would not live to see his 30th birthday. He died 87 days before that pivotal date.

The tale boasts all the elements of a southern gothic soap opera. Or a modern day ghost story. Was this litany of woe what Van Zant had in mind when he insisted matter-of-factly to his wife, bandmates, family members, audiences – and this journalist – that he just wasn't long for this world?

"When I heard that there had been a plane crash, I just knew Ronnie was one of the ones that didn't make it," Judy Van Zant Jenness recalls. "He told me so many times that I realised that he really knew what he was talking about."

Former Skynyrd drummer Artimus Pyle was often nearby when Van Zant foretold his own demise. "We were in Tokyo at some bar and we were drinking lots of sake. Ronnie told me, 'I am never going to live to see 30'," recalls Pyle. "I said, 'Bullshit man.' But he said, 'No, no, I want to go out with my boots on.'"

"Ronnie was the only one of my children who had second sight," recalled his late father Lacy Van Zant in 1995. The bearded octogenarian was slumping heavily in his La-Z-Boy Recliner. As he leaned over to spit the bug-coloured juice from his Red Man chewing tobacco into an empty plastic milk carton, he looked me straight in the eye to see if I believed him. I did.

"Ronnie told me often that he didn't expect to live past 30," remembers Kevin Elson, Skynyrd's soundman, who went on to produce Journey, Mr. Big, Night Ranger and Strangeways. "I think it was because he lived hard every day and anyone who does that – like Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix – is gone by the time they're 28 or 29. He and [assistant road manager] Dean Kilpatrick were the same. They were like, 'I have this funny feeling about this. I don't think I'm going to make it.'"

Elson was also on that rented twin-engine plane the day it fell out of the Mississippi sky. Had he been older and wiser, he says, he never would have climbed those rickety steel stairs.

"We had problems on the plane before that last flight," Elson says. "We had a day off, then a show, then a day off flying. They flew a mechanic in from Dallas who was supposed to repair everything. Everyone was sort of wary, though. But there was a lot of confidence with the pilot, Walter. Everyone felt safe with him. Except Cassie [Gaines]," explains Elson. "But it was one of those things where intuition should have been followed. Cassie said, 'I'm going to ride in the truck,' but she changed her mind at the last minute. There was so much leading up to that… Now as an older person I can see it. Man, all the signs were there."

It didn't stop there. Van Zant told journalist Jim Farber three months before the plane crash. "I wrote [*That Smell*] when Gary had his car accident. It was last year and Allen [Collins, Skynyrd guitarist] and Billy [Powell, keyboards] were in car accidents all in the space of six months. I had a creepy feeling things were going against us, so I thought I'd write a morbid song."

The oft-told, star-crossed saga of Lynyrd Skynyrd has been portrayed as the convergence of opportunity, preparedness, talent and luck. What were the chances of Dylan associate, Blues Project founder and producer extraordinaire Al Kooper walking into an Atlanta dive in the summer of 1972 and spotting this band?

Kooper had just persuaded MCA records to bankroll his Sounds Of The South label in an effort to compete with Phil Walden's Capricorn Records (home of the Allman Brothers). He was bowled over by Skynyrd's professionalism, arrangements, guitar work, and mostly by short and stocky lead singer Van Zant, who showed up in a black T-shirt and droopy jeans.

"At first he annoyed me, because he was a mic stand twirler," says Kooper from his home in Boston. "The drum major of Lynyrd Skynyrd, but instead of a baton he had a microphone stand that was, by the way, lightweight aluminum – it only looked like it was heavy. That just got me. Plus I was amused because he left his shoes on the side of the stage. But looks didn't really matter to me. The music was incredible. How can you not respond to the first time you hear *I Ain't The One* or *Free Bird*?"

In Kooper's eyes, Lynyrd Skynyrd were his Allman Brothers – the jewel in the southern rock crown. Skynyrd transcended the southern rock genre with their swaggering, dangerous music that conjured the dark fury of betrayal, perfidy or just plain orneriness and hopelessness over the diminished prospects in the rural south.

These were guys who never expected anything, but wanted everything. You could hear it in the antebellum taunt of *Sweet Home Alabama*, to the prosaic plea of *Gimme Three Steps*, and the stately requiem of *Free Bird*. That anthem-turned-albatross began life as a wistful love song about a man who was trying to extricate himself from a claustrophobic relationship. It grew to epic stature when they grafted on a mad combative closing coda that builds and tumbles on itself then doubles back again, making a nine-minute sonic edifice that stretches right across the Mason-Dixon line, purloining fills from Duane Allman and travelling all the way to London to sit at the right hand of Jeff Beck, siphoning off his *Beck's Bolero* riffs.

Skynyrd was always more influenced by second wave British invaders (Eric Clapton, Free, and the tough, garagey thud of the Stones, Kinks and Yardbirds) than the jazzy, free-falling improvisation of the Allmans. With their tales of beautiful losers, thwarted romance and dashed ambition, Skynyrd were a more menacing bunch. Peace, love and understanding never made it to Jacksonville. Van Zant's lip would curl into a surly half moon as he spat out the lyrics to on *On The Hunt*, *Poison Whiskey* or *Things Going On*. On the sneeringly sarcastic of *Working For MCA*, a song he wrote for the Sound Of The South launch party held at Richard's in Atlanta on Sunday July 29, 1973, where the band played in front of jaundiced record executives, radio programmers, disc jockeys, promoters, rock critics and T.Rex's Marc Bolan, all of whom flew in on MCA's tab.

Introduced by Al Kooper as "the American Rolling Stones", Skynyrd proceeded to sing about how the former Blues Project founder had discovered them. Van Zant stood in one spot barely moving, his bare feet squarely planted on the stage as he spat out the words to the band's creation myth. *'Seven years of hard luck comin' down on me/From a motorboat, yes, up in Nashville, Tennessee/I worked in every joint you can name, yes, every honky tonk/ They all come to see Yankee slicker saying, baby, you're what I want.'*

Behind him, a wall of guitars wailed. Ed King, the Strawberry Alarm Clock expatriate who'd been hired to play bass on debut album *Pronounced Leh-Nerd Skin-Nerd* had switched to guitar, ripped off notes that nibbled at the far ends of psychedelia, his Stratocaster filling the psychic gap between Collins' Gibson Firebird and Rossington's Les Paul. The rhythm section of Powell, bassist Leon Wilkeson and drummer Bob Burns played with military precision.

The press and hangers-on were out of their chairs from the very first assault of …*MCA* to the final lingering note of Free Bird. So devastating was Skynyrd's assault that the other acts showcased at Sounds Of The South, Mose Jones and Elijah, were forgotten. Lynyrd Skynyrd, that seven year work-in-progress, was ready at last.

Gregg Allman said, on meeting Ronnie Van Zant in 1972. "Are you the guy that's trying to sound like me?"

Anyone actually listening would know that wasn't true. Maybe it had more to do with the fact that Allman once dated Van Zant's winsome wife Judy There was always a whiff of competitiveness between the two of them.

With their take-no-prisoners attitude, Skynyrd earned themselves a formidable reputation as contenders. "When we get on that stage it's war," Van Zant told me in 1975. "There are no friends, no relatives. We are there to win."

He drilled his band mercilessly, driving out to Green Cove Springs, Florida to a little tin shack on 90 acres north of Jacksonville. This sweltering shed,

Gary Rossington: "Who died and made me boss? Ronnie did."

which quickly earned the nickname Hell House, became the boot camp where Van Zant moulded his raw recruits into musical men. He picked up his bleary-eyed and grumbling troops in his battered old '55 Chevy truck every morning at 7.30am, stopping for jugs of coffee at the donut shop where his mother worked. By 8.30 he'd be putting his charges through their paces in workdays that regularly ran eight to 12 hours; sometimes they wouldn't straggle back until the next morning.

It paid off. With Kooper's help, Skynyrd landed the support slot on the American leg of The Who's Quadrophenia tour. They went from headlining small venues in the south to performing in front of 20,000 at some of American's largest facilities. At their first show at San Francisco's Cow Palace, they saw how daunting it could be. The audience pelted the little known band with quarters – ostensibly to get them off the stage.

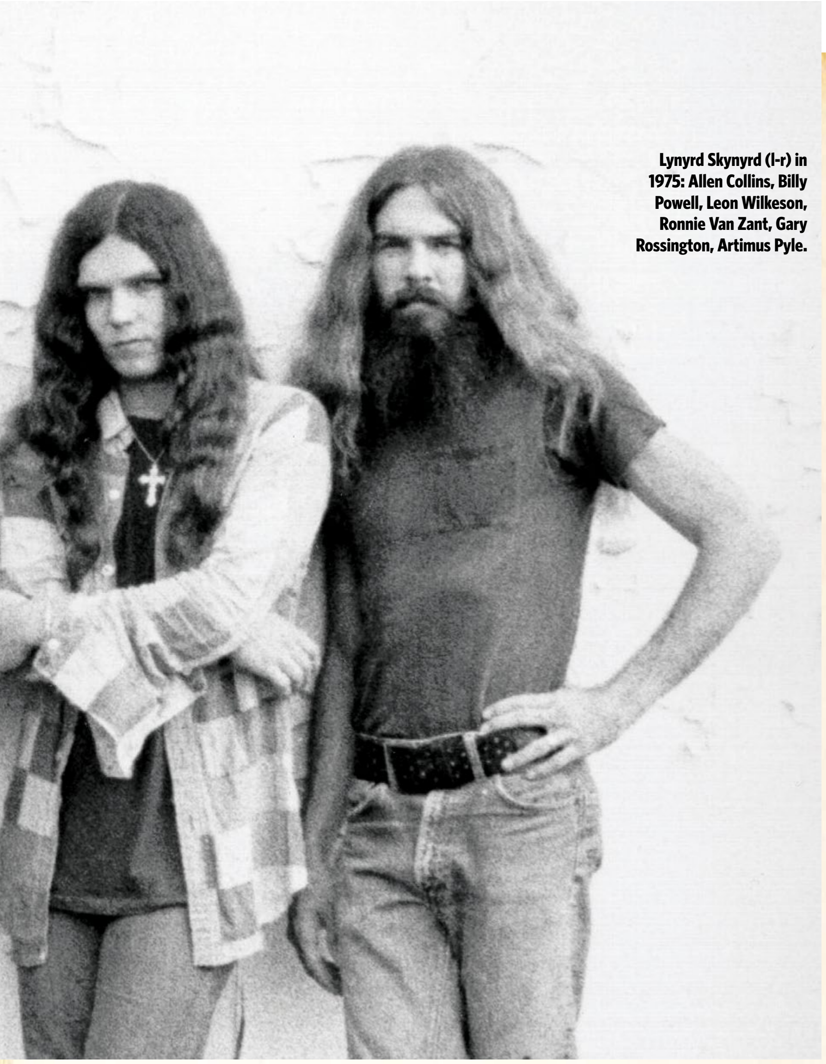
"And damn that hurt," Van Zant said at the time.

But 25 minutes later, that same jaundiced audience called Skynyrd back for an encore. "No band that has ever opened for The Who has ever gotten an encore." Who manager Peter Rudge remarked at the time. Before you knew it, Rudge was managing Skynyrd.

"They were immediately affected by the presence of The Who," remembered Bill Curbishley, Rudge's management partner and current manager of The Who. "They wanted to be crazier than [Keith] Moon; they wanted to be more everything than The Who. They were naturally a bit crazy in various ways and all that meeting with The Who did was light the fuse. It also gave them a hunger and a drive and a motivation. I was touring with them quite a bit in Europe and I felt this was a band that could have gone all the way.

"I think they made the type of music that transcended fashion," Curbishley said. "I think they would have stuck in there. Punk or alternative wouldn't have damaged them. But one thing that sticks out in my mind, is the time I got a call from my tour manager and he said there was some trouble at a place they were staying. He rang me and said, 'We've got some trouble in this hotel.' He told me they've got hold of the manager's wife's cat and they skinned it. It's not just smashing up a room – they skinned a cat!"

Ed King remembers it another way. He recalled when their first drummer Bob Burns snapped in a northern England hotel room in late 1974 on the band's first overseas trek, a breakdown the others say was triggered by an unhealthy number of viewings of the hit film, *The Exorcist*. Burns, who'd been playing poorly and suffering Van Zant's wrath regularly, freaked and tossed the



Lynyrd Skynyrd (l-r) in 1975: Allen Collins, Billy Powell, Leon Wilkeson, Ronnie Van Zant, Gary Rossington, Artimus Pyle.

GETTY X3

hotel's beloved resident cat out his fourth floor window, making for a grisly kitty cat splat outside the establishment's front door. He later went after the road manager with a pickaxe. Somehow the band got through the two-week tour, but they made a point of putting Burns on a separate flight home.

The members of Lynyrd Skynyrd were strangely united by one thing. The bandmates, almost to a man, had lost their fathers early on. Artimus Pyle's dad had perished in a plane crash that chillingly resembled the one that felled the band, leaving from the same Greenville, South Carolina airport that the band did on that final flight. Rossington was raised by a single mother, his father dying when he was just a tyke. Ed King's father had committed suicide. Allen Collins' father had just begun showing up "about the same time the cheques did," according to one member of the band. Leon Wilkeson's father was alive, but was "the weirdest human being I had ever met in my life," according to King. "He was abusive, a nasty, mean little man with the personality of a thumb."

Ronnie Van Zant assembled this fatherless regiment, all in need of guidance and direction, and hammered them into a touring and recording machine.

Hammered was the operative word. Van Zant had no compunction about hitting a band member across the mouth if he saw some dereliction of duty. Like the time Leon Wilkeson was caught staring at a girl's breasts. Or when Ronnie caught Wilkeson drinking wine during *Free Bird*. Or the time he knocked out two of Billy Powell's teeth, not to mention the time he smashed a bottle and gored the back of Rossington's hands in Hamburg, Germany, hissing "I'll do it without you."

"What I recall most is Ronnie Van Zant wasn't the sort of person I'd want to have an argument with," recalls Chris Charlesworth, a former *Melody Maker* journalist who became Skynyrd's press officer. "He'd as soon smack you in the face as sit down and discuss something at great length. He was the sort of guy that pulled himself up by his bootstraps. To the effect that he started with very little and he was getting somewhere and although he still had a bit to go, he still thought 'Well if I continue to do it my way I'll do okay. I've proved this to myself, so why should I listen to anybody else?' That's the feeling you got. Peter Rudge, whom I worked for, was a tough guy too. A brainy guy, if there was any trouble he could handle it. They were a good pair."

Van Zant and his band became known as offstage boozers and brawlers who would fight among themselves if no external adversaries were available. Their antics reached such proportions that many viewed the airplane crash as a symbolic culmination of the band's violent lifestyle.

Charlesworth, however, chalks the plane crash up to just "dumb bad luck. I don't believe for one minute that the indiscretions of their lifestyle would have led to this. That's superstitious bollocks."

"When the crash happened," Powell said. "I was lying in the swamp, holding my nose on, thinking, 'Thank God this violence is over with.'"

"I loved and respected Ronnie Van Zant, "says Pyle. "I mean that from the bottom of my heart. But I have seen the man turn into the devil right in front of me and hurt people."

"If we were The Beatles, Ronnie was the mean Beatle," says Rossington. "He was super mean, and super nice."

"They were all mean around here," remembered Van Zant's mother Marion. "But Ronnie was the meanest of them all."

"Ronnie's meanness, they all have it," remembers Jeff Carlisi, a neighbour of the Van Zants, and bandmate of Ronnie's younger brother, Donnie Van ➻

Remembering RVZ with Cameron Crowe

Ronnie wasn't always the bully he was often made out to be.

Film-maker and former rock journalist Cameron Crowe was in Lynyrd Skynyrd's company quite often. His girlfriend at the time was Skynyrd road manager MaryBeth Medley. Here, he remembers a trip to Hawaii, en route to Japan.

"We went fishing in Hawaii, he wanted me to catch a fish. I loved deep sea fishing and we went out twice and he paid for everything. He always paid for everything – in that 'that's what money is for' way. He was always the first one to reach in his pocket to pay for something that involved everybody enjoying the moment. Not necessarily getting freaky and rowdy, but he was very much into 'let's enjoy right now'. I don't think he had that much money at the time.

"So, he knew I wanted to catch a fish and we went out once. No fish. Not a bite, and he demanded we go out again and still no fish. He was so so disappointed that he couldn't deliver a fish... I had this tape of songs, a road tape. I was playing it on the boat. Years went by, the crash happened, and I was digging through these tapes and I listened to it. Halfway through the music cut out and all of I sudden I heard all of us on the boat. I must have pressed record for about three minutes by mistake. And I heard all of us laughing and Ronnie being the most gregarious and somehow the most noble guy I had ever known at the time.

"It was like my whole experience with these guys was all there in this three minutes of us fishing and laughing and talking on the boat. Then it was just gone and the tape went back to the Paul McCartney song *Beware My Love*. It just killed me."

Gone fishing: Cameron Crowe.

"My tour manager rang me and said, 'We've got some trouble in this hotel. It's not just smashing up a room – Skynyrd skinned a cat.'"

Bill Curbishley, manager, The Who

Supernatural Skynyrd

From ghostly sightings to bird attacks to messages from beyond the grave.

Ronnie Van Zant was such a force of nature that it's no surprise to anyone who knew him that he is still running things from beyond the grave. In fact, it's common knowledge in the inner circle of Skynyrd-cognoscenti that his compatriots have often used the presence of birds to signify that their fallen leader is among them. Case in point – the first time Johnny Van Zant consented to sing the words to *Free Bird* in his brother's stead in 1990 (after three years of full refusal) occurred after the bandmembers found what seemed to be an injured bird hopping on one foot in a parking lot.

"They went over and found this little bird flopping around on the pavement," revealed Will Jordan, a former staffer at the Freebird Foundation. " They thought it had broken its wing, but the wing was just wrapped up in string. One of them took the string off and the bird flew away. That afternoon Johnny agreed to sing *Free Bird.* The message is they free the bird and then the bird frees them to go on."

Except in the case of Allen Collins first visit to Ronnie Van Zant's grave. The guitarist had come to the cemetery to see the Charlie Daniels poem that Van Zant's widow had carved into a bench at the gravesite, but when he approached the bench a mocking bird dive-bombed him repeatedly and would not allow him to get close. "Allen swatted at the bird a few times, but the bird continually charged down and pecked at his head," recalled Gene Odom, the band's road manager. "Allen finally took the message and stayed back. He came to me and said, 'I think it's Ronnie telling me not to worry about him and don't come back here with your head in your hands. Go back and set the stage on fire.'"

There was no doubt in Gary Rossington's mind that Van Zant was in touch with him from the astral plane to oversee the new lineup - demanding he fire two of the band's guitarists. "It's hard but you gotta do what you got to do," said Rossington in 1997. "Especially if it's a guy like Mike Estes and Ed King. They were my brothers, and we were real close. Mikey and me we were like best friends. Then I had to fire him. He didn't do nothing wrong. Nothing happened. It's just that I had this vision, this dream and it's almost like I felt it from Ronnie and Allen. They were saying 'Hey, go for it. Do it. Just do it. So, I did it and it worked out. Rickey [Medlocke] and Huey [Thommason, who passed away in 2007] are great. The band has a whole new spark and flame."

During a two-week period during 2000, the graves of Lynyrd Skynyrd singer Ronnie Van Zant and guitarist Steven Gaines were desecrated not once but twice. The first time, on June 29, on a moonless night at approximately 3am vandals managed to drag Van Zant's body out of its huge marble edifice, and almost pry open the casket before authorities arrived on the scene. Gaines wasn't so lucky. The would-be grave robbers tipped over the urn that held his ashes - not more than 30 yards from Van Zant's final resting place, scattering them willy-nilly around the grounds of Jacksonville Memory Garden in Orange Park, Florida.

Two weeks later on July 11, deputies found David Jennings, 29, inside Memory Gardens, attempting to kick in a temporary wall at of the mausoleum containing Van Zant's body. Insiders claim that the desperados were determined to see if Van Zant really was buried in a black Neil Young T-shirt as legend has it - he was buried in a suit according to his widow, Judy Van Zant Jenness. After the second attack, the family removed the graves to an unmarked burial site, leaving the mausoleums behind at the cemetery as memorials to the musicians.

Residents of the small suburb of Jacksonville, where Van Zant grew up, don't mind where the singer is buried anyway, since they routinely talk about seeing the singer making his way towards the still waters behind his old house on Doctor's Inlet, Florida...

GETTY

Billy Powell: "After the crash I lay there thinking, 'Thank God this violence is over with.'"

GETTY

Zant, in .38 Special. "He grew up in Shantytown [the rough and tumble West Side of Jacksonville]. Violence was just part of the culture there. If you didn't fight for it, somebody would take it from you."

By most accounts, Van Zant was largely full of ire when he drank. "He knocked Billy's teeth out," remembered Judy Van Zant Jenness, Van Zant's widow. "I was there that day and that was not a pretty day. What set him off? Alcohol. The temper of the Van Zants. They all grew up in the house with Lacy. One thing breeds another, you know. It's passed on and on."

Lacy Van Zant was a Golden Gloves boxer, with no less than 36 bouts under his belt. From an early age he taught his eldest son Ronnie – named after his favourite movie star Ronald Reagan – not only knew how to fight but how to hurt.

"I started teaching him how to box when he was two-and-a-half years old," remembered Van Zant's father in 1996. "He was very, very intelligent, but he had a high temper. If he couldn't get his way, he'd run across this room and butt a hole right in the wall. I taught him if you wanted to hurt a man you'd hit him across the face. Don't hit him straight in the face, you'll only break his nose."

Over the course of his life, Ronnie Van Zant was arrested 12 times – five of them occurring during the last year of his life – and he had suffered enough bruises of his own to show he didn't always pick on the little guy. Parked outside a club in San Francisco, a rather large Chicano man wandered onto their tour bus, called the Great White Wonder, demanding to have a look around. Van Zant took umbrage to the intrusion, and lost no time in raising his fists and thumping the intruder on the side of his head. The man scrambled off the tour bus, with Van Zant in pursuit, only to be met by a crowd of the man's pals – bigger, brawnier and more lethal than their friend. Before 10 minutes had passed, Gary Rossington had joined Van Zant at the bottom of a bloody heap and the singer suffered facial injuries that required he wear sunglasses onstage.

"I remember we were on the bus and Ronnie would be lying there with two pieces of raw meat on his eyes, and he'd wear sunglasses during the show. At the end of *Free Bird* he'd get rid of the mic and take off his sunglasses and stare at the audience," recalls Billy Powell. "And the whole front row would go 'Wow'."

As mean as he could be, there was a Jekyll and Hyde aspect to Ronnie Van Zant. "He'd give you the shirt off his back," remembers his brother Donnie. "He always paid for everything," remembers writer Cameron Crowe, who partially based the band in his film Almost Famous on Skynyrd. "When we were in Japan and Jack Daniel's was $75 a bottle, Ronnie said, 'I'm buying'. He was always the first one to reach into his pocket."

"Ronnie was such a gentleman, he wouldn't let anybody mess with us," says Jo Jo Billingsley. Although all three Honkettes were stunning, there wasn't a man in miles who would come near them if Van Zant was around.

"Once Ronnie stuck a wooden coat hanger down his pants at a bar to fight to defend the honour of one of the girl singers. He turned to me and said, 'Are you with me?' I didn't have a choice but to come along," said Jeff Carlisi.

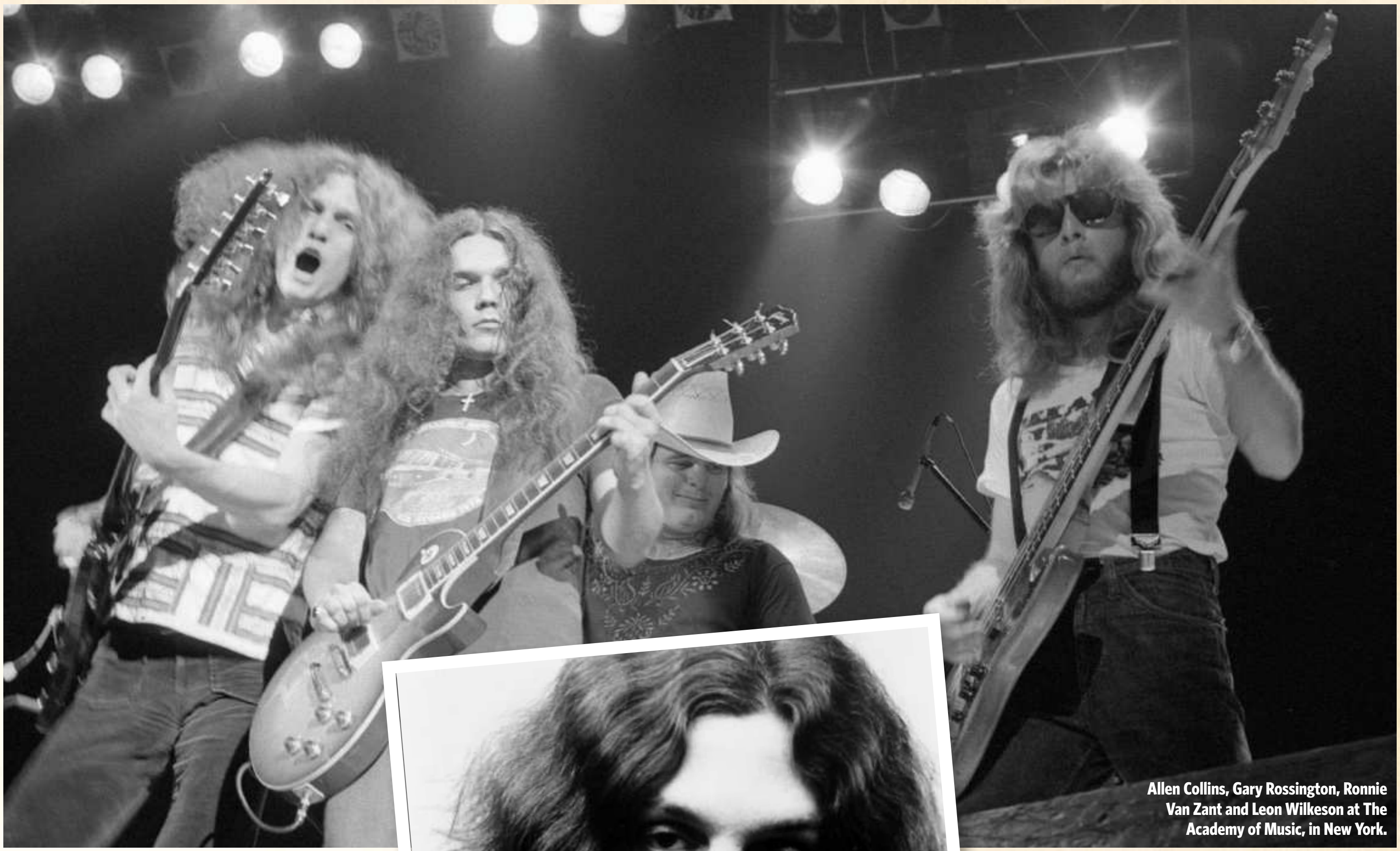
"Ronnie had this here charm about him," remembered his mother Marion in 1996. "He could charm anybody. But he was straightforward with everything he did. You could say he always knew his own mind. He never ever changed, either. He saw his old friends when he came off the road and he loved to fish would fish with anybody. One thing I surely remember is he was very protective of Allen. No one could mess with Allen. He was older than both Allen and Gary. He figured he was supposed to watch them when they were out on the road."

And if you believe in such things, he's watching over them still.

About two-and-a-half hours out of Greenville, South Carolina en route to Baton Rouge, Louisiana during Skynyrd's Street Survivors tour, the right engine of their chartered 1948 twin-engine Convair suddenly hiccupped and died. The pilot radioed to the Houston [Texas] Air Route Traffic Control Center, telling the staff they were "low on fuel", and requested vectors for a tiny airstrip in McComb, Mississippi. They hadn't even finished receiving their directions when the left engine also went and the small plane began its death glide into the Mississippi swamp.

Chris Charlesworth was due to travel with the band on that night of October 20, 1977. At the last minute his plans changed, and he decided to meet the band in Baton Rouge. Three decades later, his near miss still chills him.

"Those in the front of the plane came off worse – that's where Ronnie, Steve Gaines, Cassie Gaines and road manager Dean Kilpatrick were sitting," he says. "The crew in the back were less injured. The group and those closest to them were up front. That's where I would have sat, because I didn't know the crew."



Allen Collins, Gary Rossington, Ronnie Van Zant and Leon Wilkeson at The Academy of Music, in New York.

GETTY X2

Allen Collins survived the crash but was dogged by tragedy.

"We hit the trees at what seemed like 100mph. It felt like we were being hit with baseball bats in a tin coffee can with the lid on," says Billy Powell, his voice still breathless in the telling. "The tail section broke off, the cockpit broke off and buckled underneath, and both wings broke off. The fuselage turned sideways, and everybody was hurled forward. That's how Ronnie died. He was catapulted at about 80 mph into a tree. Died instantly of a massive head injury. There was not another scratch on him, except a small bruise the size of a quarter at his temple."

Later reports would insist that the singer was decapitated, causing his widow, Judy Van Zant to publish her husband's autopsy results on the internet.

The plane was mired in almost three feet of swamp n the middle of a forest; the sun going down so rescue helicopters couldn't land. The survivors weren't aware that the cause of the crash was due to the pilots running out of fuel, so they feared the plane would burst into flame at any moment.

Drummer Artimus Pyle and crew members Ken Peden and Mark Frank stumbled through the wreckage to go for help. Artimus, with a broken sternum and three of his ribs poking out of the skin in his chest, made his way to a farm house a painful three-quarters of a mile away, impelled by one thought. "Every painful step I took was a drop of their blood. I knew that I had to keep putting one foot in front of another."

Scrambling in the dark – fearful of snakes, alligators, or worse – the three finally flagged down a farmer named Johnny Mote, who had come to investigate what the mighty noise was that jarred him out of his house.

Unnerved by the sight of a dirty, blood-drenched hippie running towards him, Mote fired a warning shotgun blast. It did nothing to deter Pyle, who still contends that Mote shot him in his right shoulder – a claim Mote denies. When the drummer could finally utter the words "plane crash", Mote called for help – which was long in coming. Rescuers had to cross a 20-foot creek in order to get to the crash site. The 20 injured had to wait in the mud for hours, while police and emergency workers carved out a makeshift road through the middle of the woods.

Horrifyingly, it wasn't only help that came. Looters reached the site, pilfering the pockets of the dead and the living alike. By dawn almost 3,000 people had come to the crash zone – and the carcass of the plane had been picked clean.

"They were human vultures," recalls road manager Craig Reed. "All the money that was in my pockets was taken. We had been playing poker right before the crash, and I was winning big. I had a couple of grand that was taken. All my T-shirts were taken, all my jewellery, a skull and crossbones coke spoon. Silver bullets from *Gimme Back My Bullets*. All gone. They went through our suitcases. They took anything that said 'Lynyrd Skynyrd'. They even went out and took the side of the plane that was painted 'Lynyrd Skynyrd'."

"The thing I think of is the constant telephone calls with Judy Van Zant who was at Ronnie's house," remembers Charlesworth. "All the women, wives and girlfriends of the band and the crew gathered at Judy's house – there must have been a dozen women there. I just couldn't help but try to imagine the horror of the scene. Can you imagine all these women sitting around a table in the house and none of them knowing if their husbands were alive or dead after ➜

"The tail section broke off, the cockpit buckled underneath and both wings broke off. The fuselage turned sideways and everyone was hurled forward..."

Billy Powell remembers that fateful flight

Skynyrd in California during 1976 on the One More From The Road tour.

GETTY X3

they'd been in this plane crash? The horror of all these women waiting to hear if their husbands were dead? You don't forget a night like that easily."

By the next day, the injured were scattered over three hospitals – where some would remain for weeks. Allen Collins injured his spine; back-up singer Leslie Hawkins had serious facial cuts, while Billy Powell and Artimus Pyle were released from hospitals a week after the crash. Leon Wilkeson suffered a broken jaw, a crushed chest and internal bleeding and was declared dead not once, but three times, waking up only to say he had been sitting on a cloud-shaped log with Ronnie and Duane Allman.

"Ronnie told me, 'Boy get yourself out of here, it's not your time yet, get on out of here,'" the bassist told me in 1997. This would not be the last time the spectre of Ronnie Van Zant would pay a visit to friends and family.

Skynyrd manager Rudge chartered three planes to take family members to the small Mississippi town to see the survivors and in six instances, identify their dead. .38 Special guitarist Don Barnes accompanied Ronnie Van Zant's father to Mississippi and was with him when he went to identify his son. Ronnie's mother was afraid to fly, because as a girl she had witnessed an air crash where nine people died. Judy Van Zant was there, as was Billy Powell's ex-wife Stella. Former Skynyrd guitarist Ed King drove through the night arriving the next morning to see the members of the band he left in the middle of the night two years before. "I always knew something bad would happen to them after I left," the guitarist recalled.

"When the tragedy happened, I was the one who flew out with Lacy to identify the bodies," says Barnes. "The strength that this man displayed was monumental. Lacy was in denial on the plane and hoped that there was a mistake and that his son was not dead.
I had to find out who was where and we had to get to the funeral home to identify the body.

"We then went to the hospital and saw all the other people who were hurt. They all looked at Lacy through stitches and swelling and he told me not to say anything about Ronnie. He just said that Ronnie was fine and you just get better and rest. This man had just been to the funeral home and seen his son dead and decided to keep that to himself for these guys to heal. I told him that it was the strongest thing I had seen a man do."

Lacy Van Zant always insisted he warned his son not to get on that plane. "On that last day, he was standing right on this step," said the elder Van Zant, who pointed to a spot about 10 feet from where we sat, "and I begged him not to get on the charter plane. He told me, 'Daddy, that pilot can fly through the eye of a hurricane and land in a corn field.' It turns out that he was wrong."

The funeral wasn't held for Ronnie Van Zant until almost a week later, mostly because his wife Judy was falling apart.

"I went into shock when Ronnie died," says Judy Van Zant Jenness. "I didn't want to hold the funeral until Allen and Gary got out of the hospital. "She looks off into the distance, pushing a strand of blonde hair off of her eyes. "But that was impossible. And then I didn't want him buried in the ground, I insisted on a crypt. I know I drove a lot of people crazy but I wasn't going to put him in the ground and put dirt on him. I know it sounds silly now. It didn't then. So they put up a temporary crypt. Later we had this special memorial service just for Allen and Gary and we moved Ronnie to his permanent place. Theresa [Gaines] decided she wanted Steve and Cassie there too."

She wasn't the only one who had trouble keeping it together. Lacy Van Zant wore a Lynyrd Skynyrd t-shirt to the 10-minute long funeral service, and had to be hospitalized for nervous exhaustion for three days afterward. But before that, he went up to Honkette Jo Jo Billingsley, and did something that unnerved her. "Lacy came up and reached down and scooped up a handful of the dirt and wiped it across my mouth and said, 'Kiss this ground you're walking on'. And walked off."

The reason for Lacy's rather strange behavior was because Jo Jo wasn't on that flight. She hadn't been with the band at the beginning of the Street Survivor tour – intimates say she had been fired because she was having an affair with the very married Allen Collins – but according to Billingsley, Van Zant called her the night before their show in Greenville to come rejoin the band on the road.

"I thought, well, that's music to my ears," Billingsley told a reporter from swampland.com in 2003. "I said, 'Yes, of course.' While I was talking to him I felt this strange feeling and I heard this word, 'Wait.' My spirit was talking to me. I said, 'Well, we were planning to come to Little Rock anyway. Why don' t I just meet you there?' And he said, 'Good, bring all your stuff.' I went back to sleep at my mom's, and that night I had the most vivid dream. I saw the plane smack the ground. I saw them screaming and crying, and I saw fire. I woke up screaming, and my mom came running in going, 'Honey what is it?' I said 'Mama, I dreamed the plane crashed!' And she said, 'No honey, it's just a dream.' And I said 'No mom, it's too real!'"

"They had already sent me the itinerary, so the next day I called Greenville. I called everybody on the list. Finally, late that afternoon Allen called me back. He said, 'Jo what in the world is

"They were all mean around here, but Ronnie was the meanest of them all."
Marion Van Zant, Ronnie's mother

Ronnie Van Zant: Lynyrd Skynyrd's guiding light.

Sweet Home… Atlanta?

A chance meeting with Al Kooper in Georgia gave Lynyrd Skynyrd their big break. Words: Al Kooper

I first came upon the band for the first time at a tough bar in downtown Atlanta.

They were performing for a week and I was in town producing an album for somebody. Every night, we would frequent this club, as they treated us quite nicely there. The first night they played I was instantly taken in by the quality of their material. By the third night I asked if I could sit in on a song. As they had no keyboard player in their genesis, I sat in on guitar. As I slipped on one of their excess guitars, I asked "What song ? What key?" "*Mean Woman Blues,*" Ronnie Van Zant instructed, "In C#". Boy, that made me laugh out loud. It was their defence in case a sitting-in guitarist was not very good and only knew a few chords. After starting playing guitar at age 12, I had no problem in C#.

It took me three months of hounding their manager to sign them. Toward the end of the three months, Ronnie called me at home late one night. "Al, I'm sorry to call so late, but we are in deep trouble here. Someone broke into our van tonight and stole *all* our instruments and amps. Without those, we cannot put food on our families tables or pay our rents or get any gigs. I was hoping you could lend us $5,000…" I quickly replied, "All I need is the address you want me to send it to, Ronnie and you'll have it in two days…"

Al Kooper: the man who found Skynyrd.

After a moment of silence he said, "Al, you just bought yourself a band for $5000. Thanks from all of us!" By the next week, their contracts were signed and they were back on the road.

In between recording the first album and its release, they were back playing at that bar I discovered them in. It was a very tough place. I saw someone shot dead outside there one night, and there were numerous bar fights as common events there. There were two floors; on the first floor the bands played surrounded by numerous bars; on the second floor, there more bar locations and many pool tables. During a break, I was sitting at a table talking to some people upstairs, and Allen and Gary pulled me out of my seat and dragged me to the bar. The two of them then lifted me up and deposited me behind the bar and told me to sit down out of sight. Within 30 seconds, there was a huge bar fight involving our favourite band.

They were just looking out for their producer, who grew up in the Northeast USA, where such fighting was replaced by drag-racing and quizzes about B-sides of records. I was obviously *not* the hand-to-hand combat model, as usually raised in the South. I will always recall that gesture as a sign of true friendship early on from them. My hair didn't even get mussed!

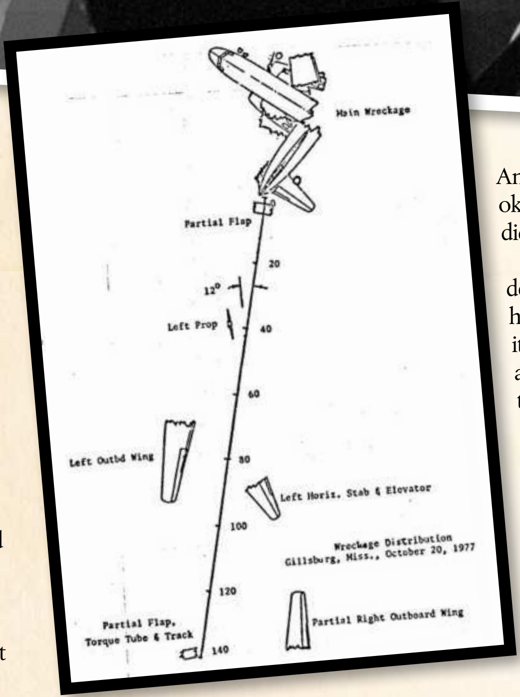
it? I've got messages all over Greenville from you.' I said 'Allen, it's that airplane.' And I told him about my dream. I said 'Allen, please don't get on that plane.' He said, 'Jo, it's funny you'd mention that, because I was looking out the window yesterday and I saw fire come out of the wing.' [When I heard about the crash] the first thing I thought was, 'God saved my life.' The Lord gave me that dream to warn me, and I did the only thing I could do and warned them. It was so weird because some of them thought that maybe I had something to do with it, but I had nothing to do with it."

Remarkably, Lynyrd Skynyrd, considered one of the greatest American rock bands of the 70s, still have a strong effect on contemporary music. Since reforming in 1987 with Ronnie's younger brother Johnny on lead vocals, Rossington has held the reins of Lynyrd Skynyrd, putting him in a position that he never imagined nor wanted. Van Zant was proud of telling people he ran Skynyrd like Stalin ran Russia, but Rossington ran the outfit more like Himmler – instructing his roadies to spy on each other.

"Ronnie used to say, you're in charge of the crew and whatever you say goes. But you better be right. Whatever you say, I'll be right there with you," remembers Craig Reed, a longtime member of the road crew. "Gary wants me tell him everything I see. That was my purpose. If you don't want Gary to know it, don't do it in front of me. Gary doesn't have the same authority Ronnie had. He slapped me in the elevator, and I just looked at him and said 'Slap the other side, I'm lopsided.'"

The entire operation is lopsided. Why? Because none of the reconstituted band members can write a song that can get near to anything Van Zant ever wrote. Nor do they have the will. "One day I went up to Gary and said, 'What happened to 'I want to be the best band in the world I shall not be denied?'" continues Reed.

Lynyrd Skynyrd with The Honkettes. Below: diagram showing the trajectory of the plane crash.



A year after the plane crash, Gregg Allman wanted to form a band with Gary Rossington and Allen Collins. “I was acting as the manager for Gary and Allen,” says Judy Van Zant Jenness. “I went down to meet with Gregg, who wanted to join up with them. But Gregg wanted them to call it *Free Bird*, so we dropped the idea. It was probably a good thing. Gary and Allen weren't ready.”

It would take them two more years to launch Rossington-Collins.

By autumn of 1979, the two guitarists felt confident enough to talk to the press about a new venture, explaining, “We've just been getting together and messing around… doing a little playing and a little thinking, but we're not worried about making any big rock'n'roll moves.” They hired singer Dale Krantz (who later married Rossington, after a rather torrid romance with Collins) and were eventually joined by keyboardist Billy Powell, and bassist Leon Wilkeson.

It was the closest they had come to any sense of normality after the crash. But it was a fool's paradise. It seemed fate was not done with them yet.

Allen Collins suffered another gut punch while he was onstage with his new band. After a performance in November 1981, he got a phone call telling him that his heavily pregnant wife had started bleeding in a movie theatre and was rushed to a local hospital, where she later died. The guitarist never seemed to recover from the loss, and he became even more extreme in his habits, retreating from friends and family. The only thing that seemed to comfort him were rock'n'roll panaceas – drinking, drugs and driving around in fast cars. Five years after his wife's death, Collins' car plunged over a ravine, killing his girlfriend, Debra Jean Watts, and paralyzing him from the waist down. Four years later, wheelchair bound Collins would be dead. Cause: pneumonia resulting from injuries sustained in the car accident.

“After Allen's wife died, he dove into a bottle and never came out,” says Billy Powell. “Allen was great. He was so funny, so happy-go-lucky and crazy,” says Rossington. “But after his wife died, he became real bitter, even with me… He never knew how many people he inspired because he died too early.”

There is something unnerving about the Northern Florida swamps at night. The brackish water is dull with a green sheen, while Spanish moss drips from the branches of the oak and cypress trees, coating them in poisonous putrid icing, swallowing the sounds of animals and the snap of a gator's jaws. Jittery types like to avoid the still waters of Lake Delancy, one of Van Zant's favourite fishing spots, where people have claimed to have spotted his ghost, dressed in black and striding towards the water with the yellow cane fishing pole he was buried with tucked under his right arm.

There are others who swear it's his head he's carrying…

Judy Van Zant recalled a dream she had, shortly after she had buried her husband. “About six months after Ronnie's death, I woke up in the middle of the night. As stupid as it sounds, it just felt like he was there. He said that he had three things to tell me. The first of course was to take care of Melody [the couple's daughter]; the second was not to worry about Allen and Gary, that they could take care of themselves. And the third was he wanted me to know that he was okay. I kept calling to him, ‘Come back, don't go away.’ I didn't want it to end.”

The fact that Van Zant would come back from the dead doesn't much surprise anyone who knew him. He had uncanny powers while he was alive. One story has it that Ronnie would point his finger at a spot in water and tell his fishing companion to put his pole at exactly the spot and within minutes a fish would be flapping on the hook. Then of course, there was the lyrics to *That Smell*, one of the last songs Van Zant wrote for *Street Survivors*. At the time people were chilled when he sang: ‘The smell of death's around you.’ After the crash, the words took on a macabre, prescient feel.

Van Zant had written the song as a cautionary tale to his band members, inspired by Rossington's near-fatal 1977 car crash and the feeling that some of them were pissing away their future with excessive drinking, drugging, and carousing. It wasn't only the tragic prophecy of the song that's chilling. In his own circle, it was common knowledge that Van Zant didn't expect to live much longer.

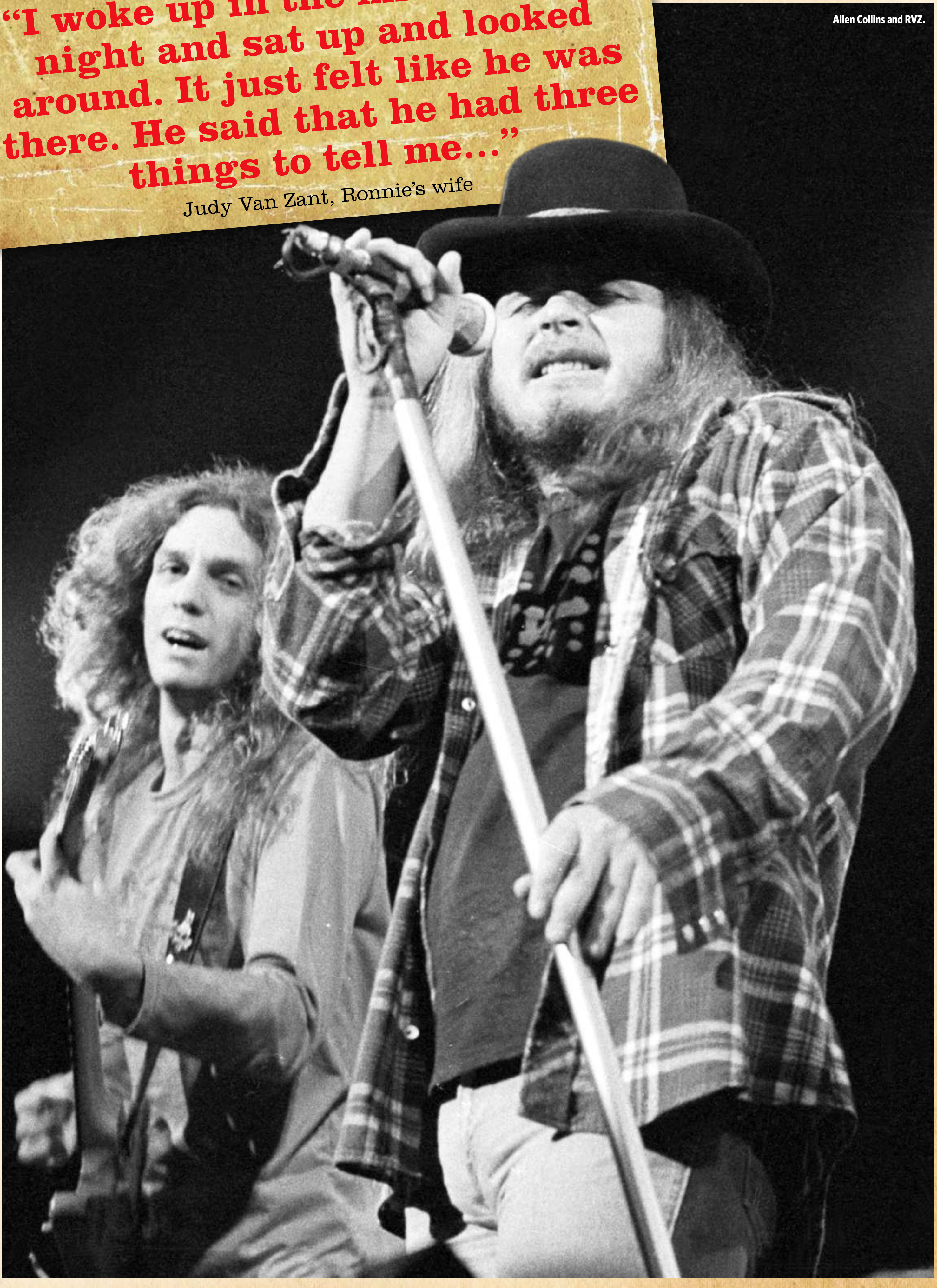
“Ronnie could see the future, always had been able,” said his father Lacy. “You know, prior to starting the Survivor tour, Ronnie gave my brother EC his best black hat and a beautiful ring that he used to wear. He also gave me several things, including his lawn mower and his 1955 Chevy pickup truck. That led me to believe that Ronnie may have known that he did not have long to live. But when we were in Glasgow and they were playing with The Who or The Stones, I forgot. It was my birthday and Ronnie gave me the trophy that they had won over there. He told those people in Scotland: ‘I don't think I'll be back over to see you, to play for you anymore because I have never felt like I'd live to be 30.’ He was 29 when he said that.”

“Skynyrd aren't haunted by Ronnie Van Zant,” says Jeff Carlisi. “They're haunted by the spectre of what could have been. And what was taken from them. They were contenders. And now they're a tribute band.”

Could Ronnie have really foretold his own death? Johnny Van Zant, who replaced him as the lead singer of Lynyrd Skynyrd, isn't sure. “Things work out in mysterious ways,” he says. “Ronnie and Stevie were only on this earth a short time. God made his mark on them for them to make their mark on the world. Hell, I don't know if we'll ever figure it out. Fate takes you on whatever road it wants. Some of us take a good road and some of us take a bad road. But, if my brother was really so sure he was going to go, don't you think he would have made a will?”

"I woke up in the middle of the night and sat up and looked around. It just felt like he was there. He said that he had three things to tell me..."

Judy Van Zant, Ronnie's wife



Allen Collins and RVZ.

GETTY X2

KNIVES OUT

Words: **Peter Makowski** Portraits: **Ross Halfin**

It's 2010: **Joe Perry** has gone solo, **Steven Tyler** is in rehab, and the rest of the band are talking about carrying on with a new singer. In a world exclusive, *Classic Rock* tails **Aerosmith** across two continents to find a band facing its demons – and the end of the road.

"Ego, chicks, booze and drugs have killed more bands than anything else."
– Ozzy Osbourne

'That one last shot's a permanent vacation/And how high can you fly with broken wings?'
– *Amazing*, Aerosmith

It's November 1, 2009. In a backstage compound a good distance from the rest of his Aerosmith bandmates somewhere in the Ferrari Stadium in Abu Dhabi, Steven Tyler is telling *Classic Rock* about his future plans. "I'm going to do something Steven Tyler, working on the brand of myself – Brand Tyler," he says. "I'm not sure what I'm going to do but a bunch of things have come in that will piss the band off real good. We'll see what happens."

This is news. Until tonight, the band and management had limited communications, only revealing snippets of (mis) information indicating that Aerosmith were to take a sabbatical and letting Tyler pursue some vague solo ambitions.

The term 'sabbatical' is usually PR code for a number of scenarios including a drug relapse, a band member going into rehab, the band sacking their manager, the band sacking a member, their record label refusing to release an album, or a member quitting.

All this and a whole lot more has occurred in Aerosmith's chequered history and today a mix of rumour and fact flies thick and fast: Steven Tyler has relapsed. There are worrying reports that his Hepatitis C has returned. Tyler wants to take time off and release a solo album but reportedly the record company won't allow this to happen until Aerosmith deliver a new record – their last on Sony. Tyler sacked Aerosmith's management and went with friend and superfan Jason Flom of UEG (and later sacks them to go with Allen Kovac of 10th Street Entertainment, reps for Mötley Crüe and Buckcherry).

So while Damage Control Inc raise their hands and bleat "Hiatus!" elsewhere in Abu Dhabi the rest of the band are in no mood to gloss over the problems. "We've been putting up with Steven's bullshit for 40 years," says drummer Joey Kramer who in his candid memoirs, *Hit Hard*, explained that "the band was my life, but it was also the source of pain, humiliation, and abuse. Steven could be punishing and critical when his expectations weren't met."

"[Tyler]'s not the easiest person to have a conversation with," agrees guitarist Brad Whitford. "Right now I wouldn't want to talk to him. He's all angry and… I don't know what's going on with him. It's all just very depressing…"

A month later, Steven Tyler admits himself to rehab and Joe Perry announces that the band are looking for a new singer.

So what, exactly, is happening in the world of Aerosmith?

Joe Perry: "It's official: Aerosmith are looking for a new singer…"

New York, 1986. It's been almost two years since Aerosmith's re-formation and the stench of addiction, resentments and general dysfunction still clings to the tenuous threads that hold this once legendary American rock'n'roll institution together. The entire band have their little peccadilloes and habits but Steven Tyler, as usual, is the proverbial loose cannon. With cancelled dates and embarrassing press interviews – in which the obviously inebriated singer espouses the virtues of his 'new-found sobriety' – it's becoming evident that this once anticipated reunion is going to extinguish itself like some pathetic, anti-climactic damp squib.

Comeback album, *Done With Mirrors,* is done *on* mirrors, sells badly and leaves their new record label boss, the fearsome David Geffen, fuming. Redemption comes when Tyler and Perry guest on New York rap trioRun-DMC's hip-hop cover version of *Walk This Way*, introducing Aerosmith to a whole new MTV generation.

Unfortunately Tyler (and other members of the band) is in no fit state to take advantage of this golden opportunity as he puts all his energies into a burgeoning opiate addiction. As a last resort, the band's latest manager – Tim Collins – decides to organise an intervention (where, in a last ditch attempt, addicts/alcoholics are confronted by family, friends and a professional third party), luring the drug-addled frontman to his office at 6am under the pretence of doing an interview with a British radio station. Suffering from acute withdrawals (it's too early in the morning to pick up his daily script at the Methadone clinic), Tyler finds himself confronted by his bandmates who proceed to air their list of grievances and give him a final ultimatum.

"I had to listen to all my friends – who I just got high with the day before – tell me what a schmuck I am and what a total fuck-up I'd become!" Tyler recalled in the band's autobiography *Walk This Way*. "I'm grateful because I got sober. But I'm resentful to this day over the way it happened."

Walk This Way, which charts Aerosmith rise, fall and miraculous resurrection, had a significant part to play in the band's restored credibility and subsequent role as poster boys for sobriety. Tyler was the first member to go to rehab and clean up (bassist Tom Hamilton was the last) and when the band returned to touring, Tim Collins did everything in his power to ensure that they were kept away from temptation (mini bars in hotels were emptied and the road crew were not allowed to drink or take drugs in front of the band).

When Guns N' Roses (protégés both musically and in chemical consumption) came on as support due to the insistence of the record company, Collins quite rightly feared the worst and ensured that GN'R were out of the venue and long gone before his charges arrived. Aerosmith garnered a reputation as recovery Nazis. (To add a bit of levity to the situation, the band made up some t-shirts with a list of all the rehabs they had been through instead of tour dates.)

Was the whole 'sharp as a thistle, clean as a whistle' image foisted upon Aerosmith to win back the trust of industry peers? Was *Walk This Way* just part of an elaborate PR campaign? "You'll have noticed that I contributed hardly anything to that book," says drummer Joey Kramer today. "That's because I was really unhappy about it. It was Tim Collins' idea."

"Making our problems public was about proving that we were back," counters guitarist Joe Perry. "We were one of the first bands to come out and say we burnt out. Now people could see that you could actually go through some pretty horrible times, come back and have some sanity in your life again. But it started to wear pretty thin after a while, it got to be old news and we just wanted to be known as Aerosmith."

Having survived four decades of fights, fallouts and fateful accidents, in recent months Aerosmith's 'old news' has become headline news. Steven Tyler has, again, fallen off the wagon (as well as a stage in Sturgis, North Dakota, last August) in spectacular fashion and in many ways Aerosmith seem to be pretty much in the same place they were in 1986. This time round Tyler has checked *himself* into rehab and, instead of celebrating their 40th anniversary, the band seem to be going through another midlife crisis.

Are Aerosmith finished?

LOS ANGELES, NOVEMBER 23, 2009. Joe Perry removes his black 'Mad Max' style goggles. "OK," he says, "so it's official: Aerosmith are looking for a new singer."

A gaunt figure, attired in a stylish junkie chic that involves a copious amount of scarves, antique jewellery and muted colours, Perry appears to be a shy, humble and intense man who only talks when he has something to say. And tonight he wants to talk.

We are sitting in a space cruiser of a limousine gliding effortlessly down the West Coast freeway towards Fresno, where the newly revived Joe Perry Project will play a show at the House Of Blues as a part of a mini-tour to promote his new album, *Have Guitar, Will Travel* (released in October in the US and available for the first time in the UK and Europe free with this issue of *Classic Rock*).

When I say 'we' I'm talking about me, Joe, photographer Ross Halfin, tour manager John Bionelli and Mrs Billie Perry, the lady whose exquisite torso is displayed on Joe's 'Billie' guitar. Ross and I were initially assigned to cover Perry's solo outing but since then the story has become inextricably linked with the Aerosmith drama that seems to be unfolding around us by the hour. Over the last couple of months the internet has been ablaze with gossip, rumour and even some hard facts about Steven Tyler's rapidly fracturing relationship with his bandmates, kicked off by the "Brand Tyler" story on *Classic Rock*'s website in November.

Although Perry is currently focused on promoting his new album, he accepts that media focus will be on Aerosmith. "That band has been my life for almost 40 years so I'd expect you to have some Aerosmith questions," he sighs. And then a smile spreads across his distinct chiselled features: "And to be honest: all the current media attention and bullshit hasn't done any harm to ticket sales for my band."

The seeds of the *Have Guitar, Will Travel* album were sown early last year when Tyler called off pre-production sessions for a new Aerosmith album, leaving two and a half months studio down time. Originally Perry was planning to put together an all-star production calling upon the services of a vast array of talent including Jimmy Page, Slash, Scott Weiland, Lil Wayne and Snoop Dog (something he still plans to do at a later date). "I envisioned doing that after the Aerosmith album was done," he explains, "but I didn't have time to call people up and get it together. I knew I could do *Have Guitar*… if I really put pedal to the metal."

The aborted Aerosmith album is one of the key factors responsible for the current split. Perry had been dissatisfied with recent releases, wasn't happy about using outside songwriters and felt that the band had lost direction and needed to return to their roots and recapture past glories like *Toys In The Attic* and *Rocks*.

"I don't think we've made a decent album in years," he snorts. "*Just Push Play* is

Tyler onstage in Abu Dhabi, November 2009. Below: with Jimmy Page at the *Classic Rock* awards, 2007. Six months later he secretly auditioned for Led Zeppelin.

my least favourite… When we recorded it there was never a point where all five members were in the room at the same time and Aerosmith's major strength is playing together. It was a learning experience for me: it showed me how *not* to make an Aerosmith record."

In an effort to pull things together, Perry called upon the services of über producer Brendan O'Brien (Pearl Jam, Rage Against the Machine and Neil Young), a man who had first impressed him as a fledging engineer on the sessions for their 1993 album *Get A Grip*.

Perry: "I've always wanted to work with Brendan. He's recorded some of the best rock'n'roll in the last 10 years. After we did *Get A Grip*, both Steven and I wanted to work with that guy. Steven was supposed to come down to my studio. The two of us hadn't written a song together for over 10 years and I just finally just said, 'Steven: c'mon let's get down and do it the way we used to y'know; you play drums [Tyler began his career as a drummer with a band called The Strangeurs], I'll play guitar and we'll write some songs.' I was expecting him in the studio and then suddenly didn't hear from him."

Tyler resurfaced a couple of weeks later and cancelled the sessions, disrupting the recording schedule as Billie Perry recalls: "It was devastating,we were all set to go.We all made arrangements at home: the kids, the crew, everything was fucking booked! It's a big process."

"Moving Aerosmith – it's like an ocean liner, y'know what I mean?" agrees Joe. "It's difficult to change direction."

It was early in the summer of 2008 that rumours began circulating about Tyler auditioning for Led Zeppelin (six months after their 02 reunion gig) – a rumour that Joe, who normally deals with the press by the code of Omerta, confirms. Perry: "When Steven disappeared I called around and somebody said that he was in London trying out for Led Zeppelin. It's something I've never talked about before outside of the family, so to speak, and kept out of the press. It's a kind of window into how hard it's been to keep the partnership together. It's certainly not the first time things like that have happened. That's the downside of our relationship."

The Led Zeppelin auditions came about through Henry Smith, a childhood friend of Tyler's who'd worked with Zeppelin (in fact Tyler invited Smith to accompany him to the Classic Rock Roll Of Honour in 2007, where they sat at a table with Jimmy Page). From various reports it transpires that Tyler came to the rehearsals unprepared and under the impression that he would be writing new material with the band: resulting in some shambolic sessions, embarrassed awkward moments and the Plant-shaped lead singer post still vacant.

Perry recently managed to catch up with Jimmy Page at last year's *Classic Rock* awards to get the full SP on the situation: "[Page] said he felt really awkward about the audition, but ultimately it was a group decision."

Tyler returned to the States thinking that Aerosmith were oblivious to his recent escapades and things carried on as normal until the tumble in

"Steven and I haven't written a song together in ten years..."

– Joe Perry

Dakota, after which it gradually became apparent to Perry that his cohort was working to a different agenda.

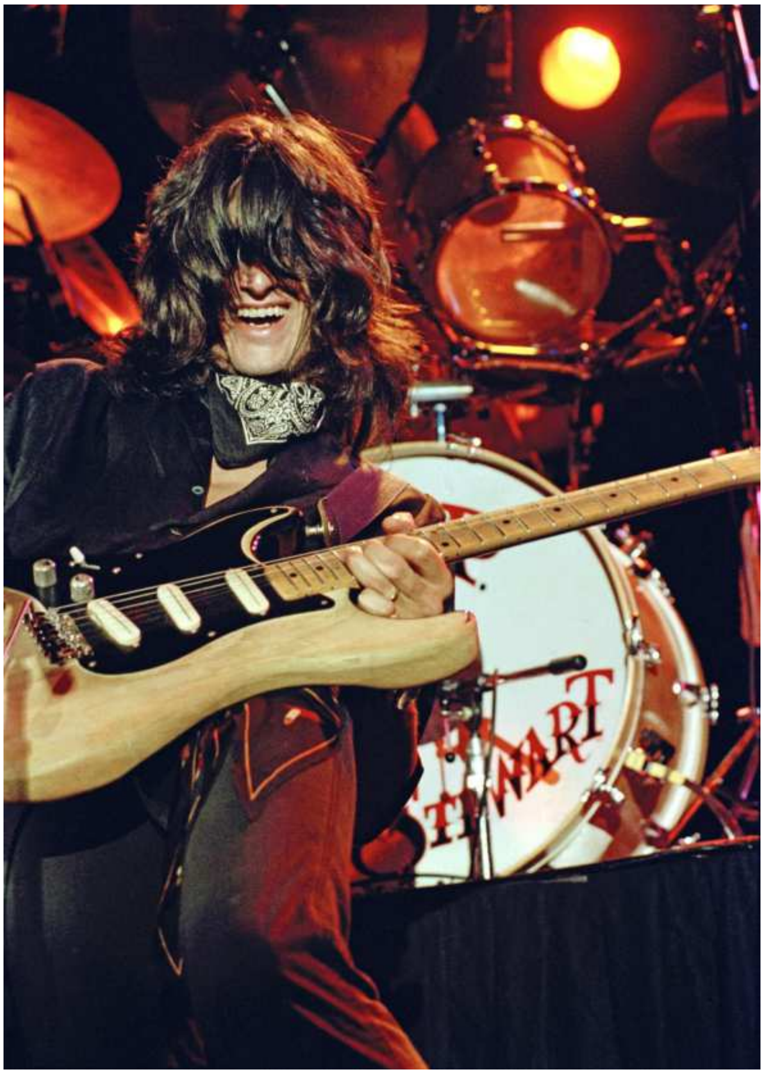
"After the Jimmy Page thing happened, Brendan, who was waiting for us to get something together, ran out of time and went off to produce Pearl Jam who got a number one record," Perry says with a grimace. "Steven didn't want to work with him – that was the vibe I got. It was like, 'Let's go into the studio and we can finish the record in a month with Marti Frederiksen, then we can be off Sony and take two years off.' I wanted the last record on Sony to be at least as fucking good as it could be, so why wouldn't you want to work with a Brendan O'Brien or Rick Rubin? We hadn't done a studio album for about eight years and I felt it was time to make a real Aerosmith record. Steven just wanted to get off Sony so he could do his solo album."

Despite the fact that Aerosmith completed their postponed dates, this was the last time the Toxic Twins communicated, with the exception of a brief telephone call and Tyler's bewildering guest appearance with the Joe Perry Project in New York in late November. Appearing from out of nowhere (and leaving as soon as the song finished) he said cryptically from the stage, "Joe Perry, you are a man of many colours. But I, motherfucker, am the rainbow!" ("I wonder if Steven knows that the rainbow is the symbol of Gay Pride?" says Perry today.) Since then they have only liaised via their separate managers and Joe can only surmise what his other half is up to.

Perry: "I think Steven wants to go off and do other projects and that's unfortunate. I've had to put things on hold many times. I've wanted to say, 'Look guys, I need three months off' to do this or that. But to be viable, Aerosmith needs to record a new studio record and do a tour behind it. We need to deliver to the fans. I know Steven wants to an album, write a book and go on Fantasy Camp. He's never told me to my face that's what he wants to do. He's never come to me and said, 'Look, I wanna do this, so if we do this we can get to there' – I just pick up everything second hand. I know he loves to play with Aerosmith or at least I know that's what he used to love to do. But now I guess he wants to do other things, which is fine as long as it's planned out, so the rest of the band can plan their lives around it."

With the new solo album under his belt and a touring outfit (making their debut in the UK as guests of Bad Company in April) Perry has at last been able to put his personal ambitions to the fore. "I've wanted for years to find some guys that I could work with because I realised a long time ago that I can do other things alongside Aerosmith. When the band first got back together it was 24 hours Aerosmith, rebuilding the band, because we had burned so many bridges. I didn't have time to explore anything else. In the past I've had to turn down a lot of things that would have been fun to do. Now that Aerosmith are on an indefinite hiatus, everyday I'm getting requests to do stuff, it's just great."

This is the first time the Joe Perry Project have been on the road since the early 80s and with the exception of the guitarist and bassist David Hull features an all new line-up; Marty Richards (drums), Paul Santo (keyboards/guitar) and Hagen Grohe. Like Hull, both Richards and Santos are grizzled veterans of the local Boston scene with CVs that include stints with J.Geils and Ringo Starr. Grohe, hailing from a small village in Germany, is the new kid on the block, having been discovered by Billie Perry. After hearing about Journey finding their new singer, Arnel Pineda, via the internet, Billie decided to scour the sites for new talent. "I saw this group called Hagen and decided to check them out for a couple of days," she explains. "He was doing covers and there was something about him. I told Joe and he wasn't sure. I said, 'Joe: it's once in a lifetime you hear someone like that – what do we have to lose? A plane ticket?' He's been in the business for 10 years and is the nicest person you could meet. So after Steven blew the friggin' Aerosmith record we got on a bus and headed down south to play Brendan the new material and he said, 'Yeah, the kid has pipes.' So we thought, 'Fuck it, let's just put out our own record. We can't count on Tyler anymore, he's a fuckin' burnout.'"


GETTY

Joe Perry onstage in 1982 during his hiatus from Aerosmith.

"Steven Tyler doesn't act like a sober person. I'm not hanging out with the guy, but his history of drug abuse is well documented and, like many people in this position, the prospects aren't good."
– Brad Whitford

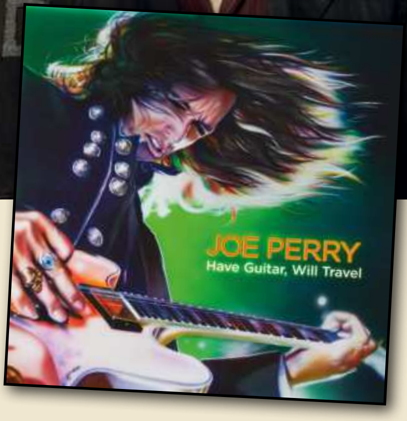
'I kept the right ones out and let the wrong ones in.' – *Amazing*, Aerosmith

FERRARI STADIUM, ABU DHABI, NOVEMBER 1, 2009. Aerosmith are about to close the World Grand Prix at the newly built United Emirates venue and Steven Tyler is getting ready to perform what at the moment looks like being the last ever show featuring the classic line up. The flamboyant if not slightly eccentric singer is ensconced in a compound a significant walk away from Aerosmith's dressing rooms (he is also staying in a hotel a three hour drive away from the rest of the band and crew's accommodation). Located on top of a man-made mound, it consists of two large white portakabins with exotic interiors that are draped in sheets and colourful cushions, accoutrements one would expect to find in a local opium den rather than a band dressing room. It's typical Tyler: high camp, low rent.

He is accompanied with an equally ostentatious entourage that includes manager Tim Heyne, who has the gracious but ferocious manner of a sedated Rottweiler (and whose services will be dispensed with a month later). Feisty and fashionable girlfriend, Erin Brady, is also on hand. My most memorable encounter with Erin occurred at a hotel in London a couple of years ago. It

"We thought, 'We can't count on Tyler anymore, he's a fuckin burnout…'"
– Billie Perry

The Joe Perry Project 2010. Singer Hagen, second from right.



Have Guitar, Will Travel

Joe Perry breaks down his 2009 solo album, track by track.

WE'VE GOT A LONG WAY TO GO "I had most of the album on demos with my vocals on them, but I wrote that one with Hagen in mind. Usually I stockpile lyrics over the years for songs. Usually it's a phrase or a line and it will gel and I'll thumb through my lyric book. Sometimes I'll go down to the studio and I won't leave until I have some lyrics, even a chorus, just something to get it started. In this case, it was one of the ones I had in the notebook and the whole line about *'give me something real'* was all about listening to conspiracy stuff and the bullshit that goes on with the elections."

SLINGSHOT "The sound at the beginning is an instrument called a Waterphone and it inspired something in me that brought a whole *Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas* thing. I can remember reading that and actually doing it when the Project played Vegas. We went from gig to gig in a van, we'd picked up some stewardesses, and it was just three days of madness. I admire Hunter S. Thompson from a distance and I can definitely relate to his need for isolation and space so you can blow up things if you need to. That probably explains my fascination for explosives, although I didn't fool around with that stuff back in the days when I was fucked up."

> One of the reasons for doing a solo record is that you can get out there and do whatever you want and you don't have to answer to anybody...

DO YOU WONDER "Marti Frederiksen and I wrote that for *Just Push Play* about 10 years ago. When I played to Brendan O'Brien he loved it and said we should consider it for the next Aerosmith album but Steven never came up with any lyrics for it. And when work on the album went down I thought, 'Fuck it! It's been almost 10 years, Brendan thinks it's got potential, I think I'll put it on my record'."

SOMEBODY'S GONNA GET (THEIR HEAD KICKED IN TONITE) "It's pretty well known that I'm a huge Fleetwood Mac fan. They probably influenced me the most as to what a band could be. It's a song I've always wanted to cover and I can remember playing it to the guys about 15 years ago but it never went anywhere. I knew it was a song that needed a band to play it, which is why I didn't consider it for my last solo record. But this time around it was a no brainer. It's also a tribute to Gene Vincent. If Elvis is the polished diamond ring, Gene Vincent wears the brass knuckles."

HEAVEN AND HELL "That's the one that articulates the feelings on what's going on out there. We're fed bullshit through the media and all the world's leaders are puppets. That's why the lyrics are a little darker than you would find on an Aerosmith record. That's another reason for doing a solo record, because you can get out there and do whatever you want and you don't have to answer to anybody."

NO SURPRISE "It didn't occur to me that there was an Aerosmith song with the same title until much later. Basically I wanted this album to be a soundtrack for a live show. I wanted to play songs that people hadn't heard before that they would remember. So I kind of simplified things. I've boxed myself in many times with weird tuning and things like that. On this one I was determined to be able to play the whole album on one guitar and I pretty much got away with it. When I was originally thinking about doing this album I was going to bring in a bunch of different singers and getting some guest players. Obviously Jimmy Page is someone I would have called, Slash. As for singers I was thinking about Scott Weiland, Robin Zander, and Lil Wayne. Maybe I'll do that next time."

WOODEN SHIPS "This one has to be about 12/14 years old and it was one of the first things I wrote when I built my new studio, The Boneyard. I went guitar crazy on it and in the end it was really hard to find places to sing on it, so I decided to turn it into an instrumental and throw a few more guitars on it!"

OH LORD (21 GRAMS) "That's one of those songs that's more like a poem. I've always loved Jim Morrison and the way he approached rock'n'roll. I always looked at his stuff as poetry with music under it. Even though he was a rock singer who wrote rock songs, he always thought of himself as more of a performance artist, he was always very impromptu and never doing a song the same twice and I've always admired that."

SCARE THE CAT "We'd had our cat for about a month and he was kind of experimenting, loitering around different parts of the house and finally came down to the studio and started getting used to the music. Anyway we were getting ready to lay down this track, I had set everything up, and he was sitting on top of the amp. I hit a chord to check the sound and he bolted like lightning. So hence the name."

FREEDOM "That speaks for itself. They've been putting chips in animals for years. I have Friesian horses that are pure bred and they put a chip in under the skin that has all the information that proves they're legitimate. Then I saw some pictures of people having them injected under their skin. *Freedom* speaks to that in a very cynical black humour kind of way."

was cold, crisp winter evening and Ross Halfin and myself were sat in her room waiting for Tyler. Erin was wearing a gossamer wisp of a designer skirt and when Ross pointed out that it was freezing outside, she just smiled, lifted up her dress, and stuck a couple of fingers between her legs. "It may be cold outside boys, but it's hot in here!" she said as Tyler emerged from the bathroom to observe our paralysed expressions with a conspiratorial grin.

Today Tyler seems slightly edgy, especially about my appearance in Abu Dhabi. "Once the band hit the final note and the show is over, then I'll tell you the whole story," he promises. It never happens: all further attempts to interview the singer are rebuffed, with management telling us that, "regretfully, Steven has had to return to the East Coast quickly to immerse himself into some time sensitive endeavours that require his full attention."

Outwardly Tyler looks OK. He has the beginnings of a beer gut that is at odds with his scrawny gait and with his hyperactive mannerisms and speed jive-talk that bounces off at surreal tangents, it's difficult to tell if the man is out of it or his normal crazy self. The fact that a couple of months later he put himself back into rehab suggests the former.

At the time of the interview, Tyler was enthused about the break from the band and was still finishing his autobiography (entitled *Does The Noise In My Head Bother You?*). "It should be coming out in March/April," he says. "It's been a difficult run. The original transcripts were done while I was on tour with the band. It's kind of hard writing a book between dates."

Still recovering from his fall, the dressing room is kitted out with exercise equipment and Tyler admits it has taken a couple of months to get well enough to do this show, which gave him more time to work on the book. But even with the current rift, he says he's elated at playing in the United Emirates and has noticed that Aerosmith seem to still be capable of pulling in a new young audience. "Holy shit! Because of *Guitar Hero* there are 12 and 13 year old kids coming up and telling me the lyrics they like," he enthuses. "And they know I wrote the lyrics, whereas on some of the albums it says 'Tyler/Perry' and people thought that Joe wrote the lyrics. I am the lyricist of this band. Joe's got a tech to change his strings. I don't have one to change *my* strings [laughs]. Some of us have to work a little harder, write the songs – but that's what I love to do the most. I've got eight songs written for the solo record, whereas Joe has his own solo record out with some German guy singing on it. I wish him the best of luck. I'm not sure how it's going. I don't think the radio's playing it. I haven't heard it. "

As a lady behind us makes gestures that it's time to wind up, I ask a by-now-animated and communicative Tyler about his future with the band. "No matter what I do I am looked upon as the vocalist of Aerosmith," he says. "So I can use that to my advantage. We don't speak much anymore. I know Tom [Hamilton] is working on health issues and I just say my prayers for him. I've nothing but love for Tom. The band is so fucking great. It's still the original guys, we're still kicking ass and taking names."

'And I'm saying a prayer for the desperate hearts tonight.'
– *Amazing*, Aerosmith

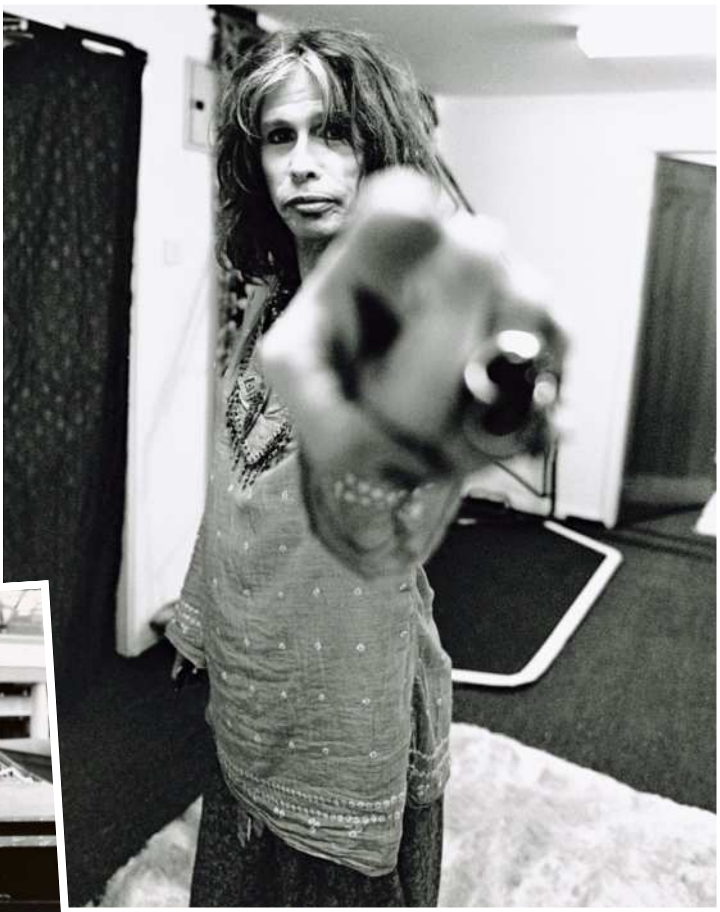
"One of the reasons for the current hiatus is because there are internal problems in the band and to be perfectly honest one of them is prescription drugs," says Joey Kramer, when we speak in Abu Dhabi before the show. "It needs to be dealt with and I'm sure it will be. For younger people it's easier to come in and out of using. But when you get to the point where you're 61 years old [Tyler was 61 at the time of this interview] and you are abusing prescription drugs it's much more difficult to stop. It's about people, places and things. If you're surrounding yourself with the wrong people, everybody is enabling you and you are weak- minded, that's where you're going to go."

There have been quite a few stories querying Tyler's state of health in recent years, one of the most famous being his appearance at the MAP awards in May 2008 giving Slash an award for sobriety. As one onlooker observed: "He was so wasted that he didn't know where he was and completely incoherent."

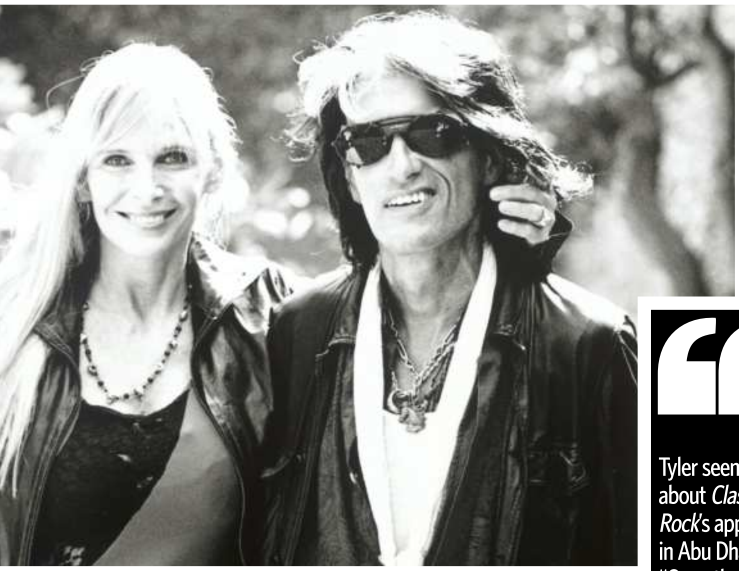
Meanwhile, some of the singer's friends in recovery have come up to the plate to confirm that there was a time when the troubled singer took his recovery very seriously.

"I remember when I played with Aerosmith at the Marquee and Donington in 1990 they really ➻

Perry at soundcheck in Abu Dhabi, and (right) with his wife, Billie.



Tyler's dressing room in Abu Dhabi – far from the rest of the band.



> Tyler seems edgy about *Classic Rock*'s appearance in Abu Dhabi. "Once the show is over I'll tell you the full story," he promises. It never happens.

"Nobody could replace Steven – but if someone was willing to do it, why not?"

– Brad Whitford

LIVE SHOT: MICKHUTSON/GETTY

Sober reflection: Perry backstage and, right, the band at Donington, 1990. "Inspiring to be around," says Jimmy Page. Below: Tyler with girlfriend Erin Brady.

embraced their sobriety," recalls Jimmy Page. "This is before I got clean and it was inspiring to be around."

"I'm the only sober member of the band at the moment," one of the group tells me off the record, and it is hard to gauge the band's current state of health. One of them openly drinks and there are suspicions that it's not only Tyler who is indulging in a bit of self-medication, which would seem to make their current hostility towards him a bit hypocritical.

As Tim Cain of the *Illinois Herald* pointed out: "It's interesting to watch Aerosmith throw Steven Tyler under the bus, then man the wheels of the bus to back over him a couple of times to make sure that he's down. Is the pot calling the kettle black here?"

It seems that in an effort to win back the trust of the industry, Aerosmith painted themselves into a corner with an image that was championed by an over-zealous manager and not totally supported by the rest of the band. It's a sorry state of affairs that they have recently hit the headlines not because of their stunning live shows or a number one album but due to the fact that their frontman took a dive from the stage and then a few days later was captured on YouTube buying booze. For the likes of Keith Richards this sort of behaviour is mandatory. For Tyler it's a faux pas that seems to have sent them spiralling into another personal rock bottom.

REX FEATURES

"It's so sad that the breaking up of the band is due to the same things as before: drugs and girlfriends," laments Billie Perry. "You would think that people would learn from past mistakes. I guess history just repeats itself. It's so selfish because it involves four other mates."

"We can't sit around waiting for Steven," Joe Perry says firmly, sounding like a man losing his patience. "It's not fair to the rest of the guys. This is an important year for us and we need to get out there, tour and celebrate our anniversary."

The rest of the band has already put out the feelers for potential frontmen. *Classic Rock* can confirm that Billy Idol, Chris Cornell and Paul Rodgers have all been approached. Lenny Kravitz, meanwhile, has already publicly turned down an offer out of apparent loyalty to Tyler, a family friend.

"It would be great to find some fresh talent but in all honesty we need to find someone with a track record or we wouldn't be able to get decent-sized venues," admits Perry. "If we got someone like Chris Cornell then we could do some of each other's material, put on a great show and go out for a respectable fee."

So would Aerosmith *sans* Tyler work? Judging from the postings on the

Abu Dhabi, November 1, 2009. Could this be the last live shot of Steven Tyler with Aerosmith?

internet most fans are totally appalled at the thought. "There is no Aerosmith without Steven Tyler!" seems to be the unanimous verdict.

"It's big shoes: nobody could replace Steven, he's one of a kind," agrees Whitford, adding, "but if somebody was willing to do it and the chemistry was right, why not?"

Perry is also aware that the band's career is time-limited, some members are totally dependent on money made from touring, and as he so eloquently puts it, "the end is closer than the beginning".

"I grew up in an era when a band lasted two or three years and then died – literally. Janis, Jimi, and Jim…" Perry reflects. "Five years after Aerosmith got back together I realised how fragile we are as humans. There was a time I thought we were bullet proof but then things happened and I came to a realisation that I had to play every gig as if it was my last show."

Perry admits that the door will always be open for Tyler: "It would be great to do a special concert to celebrate our 40th anniversary and if Steven wants to show up and sing a couple of songs, he will always be welcome."

"My ideal scenario would be to put to put Aerosmith back on track," agrees Whitford. "We're in the twilight of our career so it would be nice to do it right. No one person in this band is going to make anything as big as Aerosmith," he adds, laughing. "It's not going to happen."

At the time of going to press there has been another strange twist to this ever-evolving story. According to certain sources, Aerosmith will be regrouping in the spring to rehearse for a series of large shows in 2010. This coincides with when Tyler completes his stint in rehab. To add fuel to the fire it seems that Perry has cancelled some mooted European and Japanese dates (just leaving the UK part of the tour intact). If this is true then the first date for the re-formed Aerosmith, with or without Tyler, will more than likely be in April at the forthcoming International Show Of Peace Concert in China at Beijing's famous Bird's Nest Stadium (the venue for the last Olympics). Perry has claimed that, in fact, he – not Aerosmith – will be playing, but the rumours persist. Certainly, Aerosmith still appear on the event's official website as one of the 'invited' artists .

(The thought occurs that perhaps all of this is just another form of intervention – a way of shocking Tyler into action and rehab – but *Classic Rock* doesn't think so. Apart from anything else, that would happen behind closed doors, not with knives out in public.)

Of course, for Steven Tyler to front the band in China is dependent on him completing rehab, which is not a given (success rate for people completing treatment is between 30-50 percent) and wanting to rejoin the band. This does, at least, seem to be the case as Tyler confirmed in his most recent press statement: "I am eager to be back on the stage and in the recording studio with my bandmates."

"I think that over the years we've learned that the magic is in having five guys that work together, make music and put personalities aside," says Perry. "We may not be the best musicians in the world but there's a certain thing that meshes together and it gets stronger with time. We're at our strongest when we're playing together. We're kinda like a family by choice and as with most families you're not always on the best of terms. So you've got to figure out how to make it work because you're bonded together. Families are bonded by blood – bands are bonded together by the magic of being able to make music."

"It's like a marriage," concludes Tyler. "Some of us don't get along but when we're on stage we sure as fuck do and that's all that really matters. Right?"

"Some of us don't get along but when we're on stage we sure as fuck do…"

– Steven Tyler

THE GOLD STANDARD

Brian May and Roger Taylor look back at 50 years of **Queen**: the incredible journey of four young musicians with "an insane confidence and a precocious belief in our own unique talents" who conquered the world.

Words: **Dave Everley**

Brian May isn't one to live in the past. But the Queen guitarist has recently been listening to an old tape he didn't know existed. It features a recording of one of the group's earliest gigs, in a lecture theatre at his alma mater, Imperial College London. It's the sound of a band who are far from the finished article, he says. But it's exciting to go back there, to hear the nascent Queen as they were at that long-gone moment in time.

"We're debating what to do with it," says May, hinting that it might one day get a proper release. "A few years ago we'd have felt very protective and thought: 'Nobody should hear this, because we're very rough.' But now, in the position that we are in our lives, we feel forgiving. We're not ashamed of where we were at that time. It was us against the world."

One of the most fascinating things about the tape for May is Freddie Mercury's performance. The singer was still a work in progress at that point, not yet the vocal powerhouse he would become. "Freddie had all the will and charisma and passion, but he didn't have the opportunity to harness that voice yet," May says. "Which makes me hesitate a little bit, because I'm not sure Freddie would be that happy hearing himself at this stage." He pauses for a second, then reconsiders. "But strangely, if he were alive and sitting here at this moment, he'd probably be the same as me: 'Oh darling, we were *kids*.'"

Today, the four kids on that tape are down to two. Mercury died in 1991, bassist John Deacon retired from the band and public life in the late 90s. Only May and Taylor remain, the beating heart of the band's current, Adam Lambert-fronted incarnation and custodians of Queen's stellar legacy.

"I do take great joy in the fact that there's an awful lot of love for us still," says Taylor. "It constantly surprises me."

2020 was due to be a big year for Queen. Not only did they have a series of massive arena shows across Europe lined up during the summer, it also marked the band's 50th anniversary. Yet even before the pandemic put the brakes on the former, May and Taylor had absolutely no plans to mark the latter.

"Everybody else can celebrate it if they want," May says amiably. "We'd rather just celebrate being here and being alive."

Taylor puts it more bluntly: "We didn't want to draw attention to how fucking ancient we are."

Whether they like it or not, 50 years is a milestone. The two of them might not want to mark their Golden Jubilee, but for everyone else half a century of one of the most outrageously brilliant bands of them all is something worth celebrating. ▷

GETTY

"We really did want to be hugely successful. It was a measure of our foolish vanity."

ROGER TAYLOR

When Roger Taylor realised that covid-19 had scuppered his band's plans for 2020, he did what any self-respecting A-list rock star would do: he spent a few weeks sailing around the Mediterranean on his boat. "This shit year?" he says of the past 12 months, not inaccurately. "But we were the lucky ones. I can't complain."

It's a few days before Christmas, and Taylor is at home in Surrey. Even on the other end of a Zoom call he exudes a distinct rock-star aura. He always seemed to be the member of Queen most comfortable in their own skin, and today, white-bearded and garrulous, he's lost none of that. "It's been hard work, but I've tried to extract every ounce of fun that I could get out of any given situation," he says of his 50-plus-year journey with the band. "You've only got one life that we know about, so I think you should enjoy it. And I've enjoyed it."

Do you ever think: "Fifty years. How the hell did that happen"?
Ridiculous, isn't it? After we lost Freddie, Brian and I both thought: 'Well, that's that.' And then events conspired to keep everything going. Every time we think the band is done, that's that and it was wonderful, something else comes along. It's not a conscious effort. Somebody told me the other day that the *I Want To Break Free* video just got it's five-hundred-millionth view on YouTube. And that's not even one of the biggest ones.

Does five hundred million views on YouTube give you the same thrill as getting a gold record did back in the day?
That was back in the day. It's not the same now. I don't even understand the charts. What's Number One in the singles chart? Well, nobody really gives a shit, do they? The album charts still seems to be important. We recently had a Number One album [*Live Around The World*], which was the first time in a long time. That was a big thrill. That chuffed us.

You met Brian May in the jazz room at Imperial College in London 1968. Were you plotting world domination from the start, or was it more about having the chance to play gigs and meet girls?
Well those were good alternatives. But we really did want to be hugely successful. It was a measure of our foolish vanity in those days. But when you're young you'd better be arrogant and have big dreams, because it's not going to happen by accident.

There are some great photos on your Instagram of you and Freddie at the stall you both ran in Kensington Market, on New Year's Eve 1969. Where did you first meet him?
It was at my flat in Shepherd's Bush. He was a mate of Tim [Staffell, singer with May and Taylor's pre-Queen band Smile] from Ealing college. He was on the periphery, just a mate, really. He had musical aspirations, but we were quite good players and we weren't really sure if he could sing. But his drive and determination to write original stuff was great. And of course we became huge friends because we had the stall. We were living in each others' pockets, scrubbing together to eat.

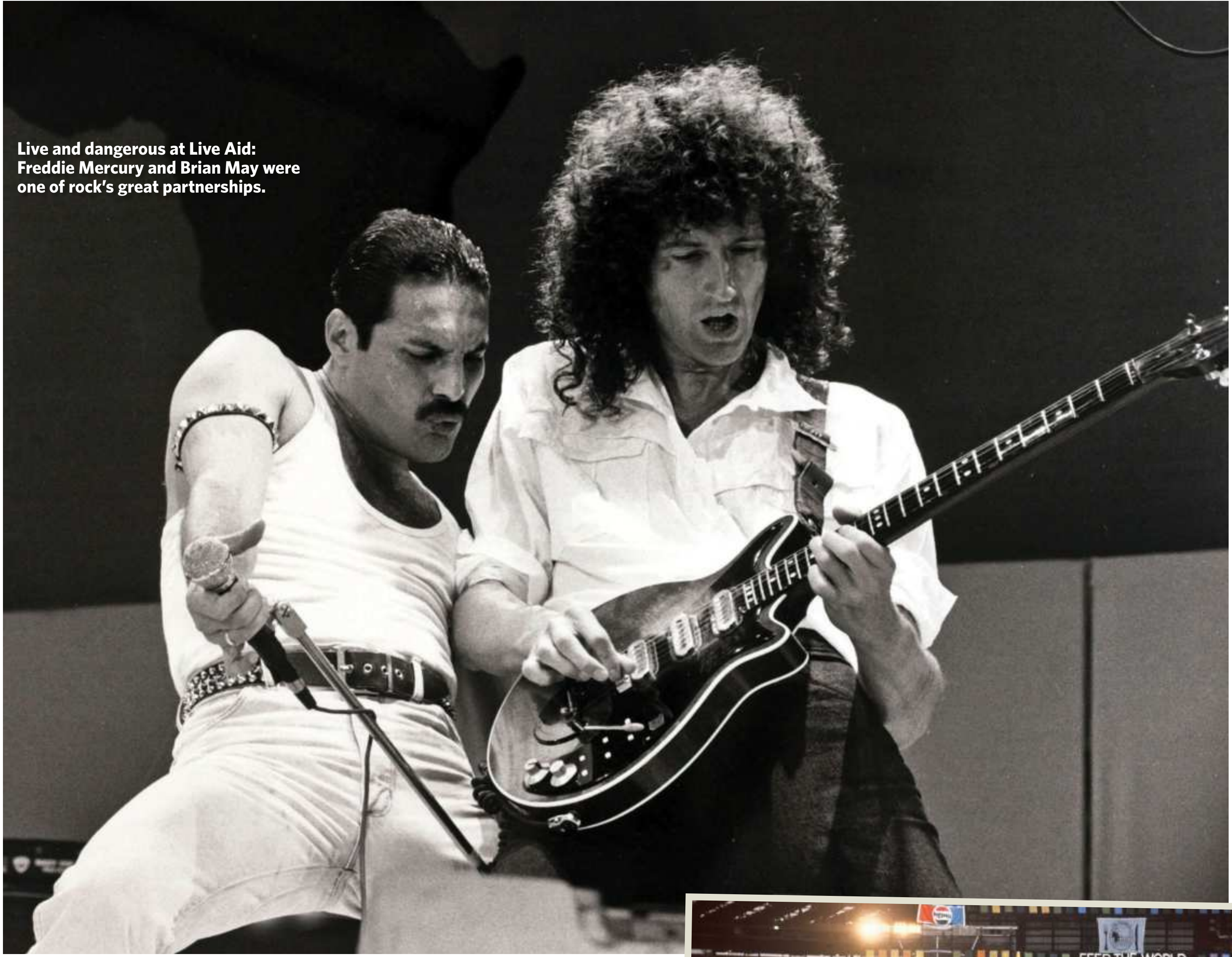
What was a night out with Roger Taylor and Freddie Mercury like in the early days? Were you hanging out at the trendy clubs?
Oh no, we couldn't afford stuff like that. We'd be in a pub, and then we'd probably meet some girls and try to get some drinks off them.

Queen's first gig was on June 27, in your home town of Truro. What do you remember about it?
My mother put on the gig. It was for the Red Cross. People did not know what to make of the not-quite-fully-formed Freddie, who was fairly outrageous.

Is it true that Genesis tried to poach you from Queen early on?
Well, they invited me to the studio to listen to them, then we went to the pub. They didn't say: "Do you want to join the group?" But I get the impression that's what they wanted, because their drummer had left. They're all lovely people, but I didn't really get the music, to be honest. It was a bit too prog for me.

I had a wonderful offer from Mick Ronson and Ian Hunter, actually. It was going to be called Hunter Ronson Taylor. I think that would have been good. ▷

MAIN: GETTY; INSET: ALAMY



Live and dangerous at Live Aid: Freddie Mercury and Brian May were one of rock's great partnerships.

"I do take great joy in the fact that there's an awful lot of love for us still. It constantly surprises me."

Roger Taylor

When you listen to the first two or three Queen albums, what do you hear?
We were in development for a long time. The first album was a combination of a lot of ideas we had, but it never sounded like we want it to sound. We had much more freedom on the second album, and we started to stretch out and experiment. By the time we did the third [*Sheer Heart Attack*, 1974] it had kind of got there.

A lot of people hold up *A Night At The Opera* as Queen's best album. Would you agree.
Not really. I think it's our most eclectic. I do think it's a great album, but I prefer several of the others.

You were fortunate to have four great songwriters in Queen. Were you jealous when one of the others had a hit?
Absolutely not. I remember Freddie writing *We Are The Champions*. I said: "That chorus is killer." I was very proud if someone came up with a great song. A Number-One single belonged to all of us.

Your song *Sheer Heart Attack*, on 1978's *News Of The World* album, was famously viewed as a response to punk. But you started writing it in 1974.
It was nearly finished but I never quite got it together for the *Sheer Heart Attack* album. It was always intended to be aggressively punky, even though we never saw it coming.

Speaking of punk, the story of Freddie Mercury meeting Sid Vicious while you were both in Wessex Studios at the same time has been told a million times.
[Laughs] And I've heard it a million times, each time slightly different.

What were the Pistols really like?
We got on with them really well. Apart from Sid. He was a thicko. John [Lydon] was very sharp. He was quite visually aggressive, but we got on rather well. I remember socialising with him in New York later.

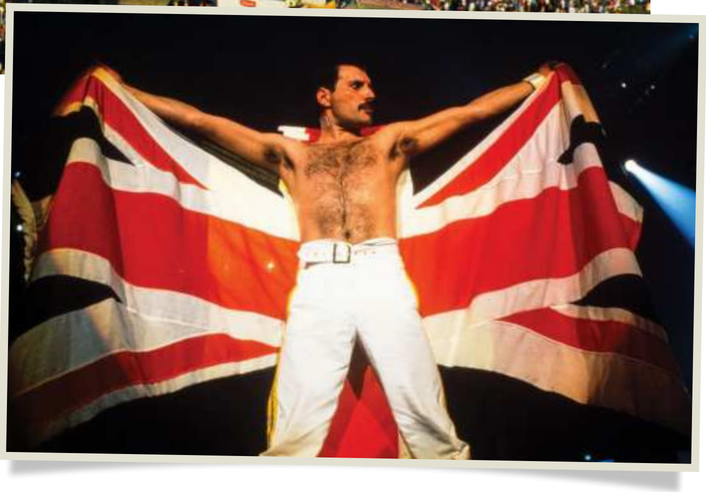
Were you at the 100 Club watching bands like The Damned and The Clash?
I did go to some punk shows. I saw The Damned at the Royal College Of Art, and they were pretty cool. I thought Captain Sensible was great – this big, tall guy dressed in a pink tutu. But I couldn't stand the gobbing. That was pathetic.

You seemed to really enjoy being a rock star. Of the four of you, you were the one most likely to be papped coming out of some swanky club like Annabelle's.
[Laughs] I never liked Annabelle's. It was full of old politicians groping young girls. I never saw anything to be ashamed of [in being a rock star]; "This is who we are, this is who I am."

You were the first member of Queen to release a solo album. If that had done well would you have gone: "Right, lads, I'm off"?
No, no, no. Never. We used to call the band The Mothership. Whatever we did, we always used to

MAIN: GETTY; INSET: AVALON

Queen arriving by helicopter at Knebworth House in Hertfordshire on August 9, 1986 for the final show of their Kind Of Magic tour. It would be their last ever show with Freddie.



"It's been hard work, but I've tried to extract every ounce of fun that I could get out of any given situation."

Roger Taylor

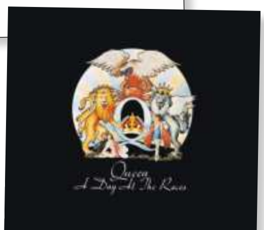
come back to it. It was our gang. I never wanted to be a solo artist. I only wanted to be in a band.

The first half of the eighties was a roller-coaster time for Queen. *The Game* and *Greatest Hits* were huge hits, but then you released *Hot Space* and America basically turned its back on you, then Live Aid eventually put you back on top.
It was a weird time. *Hot Space* isn't really my favourite album. We had drum machines and this stupid sampler – which was the world's most expensive coffee table. I can understand the people who liked our stuff before not particularly liking that album. It's got some good stuff on it. I fail to remember what.

Put Out The Fire *is on it.*
That one's nice.

And *Under Pressure*.
We rarely sat down and wrote songs together as a band, but *Under Pressure* is one of the few exceptions. We were doing Cream covers for fun, and David [Bowie] sat at the piano and started gong 'plink plink plink'. So we went: "Let's do our own song." The bulk of it was done in one hectic night in Montreux. But really, David and I finished off most of the rest in New York in The Power Station. Fred arrived very late. Brian never turned up. Neither did John.

Did you get on with Bowie, or were you just guys who happened to do the same job?
We hit it off immediately. He was the most fascinating man. Hilariously funny, dangerously witty and great company.



Who were you closest to in Queen?
It was probably Freddie. But we were all fairly close. You had to be.

You had the best seat in the house for every Queen gig. What was it like up there when the band were in full flight?
It was fantastic. When we were on we were a real machine. And when Freddie was on form it was magnificent. But I have to say that Brian and I still play as well as we ever did technically. Maybe without the fire and ferocity, but we still make a very big noise.

Did you have any inkling that the Knebworth show in 1986 would be the last Queen gig?
That tour was a real triumph. Sold-out stadiums, two Wembleys, then Knebworth, which was a massive crowd. But we kind of knew that Freddie was not going in the right direction, physically.

After Freddie told you of his diagnosis, how did you process it?
With difficulty. We knew he'd been ill for a while. He was in bad shape.

But it seems like there were moments of real joy in those last few years you had with him?
During *The Miracle* and *Innuendo*, Fred was not what he had been. He just wanted to keep working. Which really brought us together. We gathered up around him and sort of protected him. ▷

GETTY x2

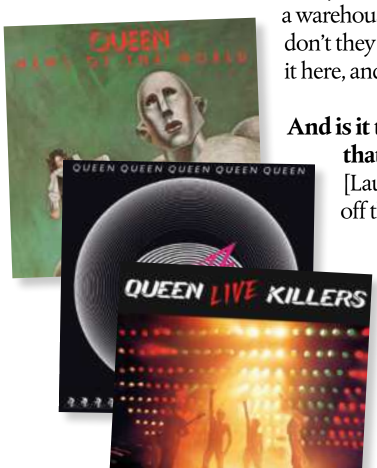
George Michael (and David Bowie, inset) performing with the three remaining members of Queen at The Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert at Wembley Stadium on April 20, 1992.

His death didn't really sink in at first. Brian and I took five years to get over it. We were lost. The nineties, for me, was almost a lost decade.

There was a huge outpouring of love around the Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert at Wembley Stadium.
I do remember reading some very average reviews from *The Sun* or some spunky rag like that. I don't know, I was in this whirlwind of activity – it felt like I was in some sort of dream. I do remember being determined that we'd get Elton singing with Axl, which was great, because Axl never turned up for rehearsal. David turned up, Robert Plant was lovely. George Michael was magnificent.

There were rumours that George Michael was going to replace Freddie as Queen's new singer. Any truth in it?
No, not really. I remember hearing the rumours. But it wouldn't have suited us. George wasn't really used to working with a live band. When he heard the power he had behind him in rehearsal he couldn't believe it. He thought he was on Concorde or something.

Do you still talk to Freddie at times?
I don't think of him being here in my studio now. But when Brian and I are both in the room we think we know what Fred would have said if he'd been in the corner.



Would Queen still exist if Freddie was alive?
I can't give you a definitive answer, obviously, but I'd guess it would still be together in some form. I don't think Freddie would have wanted to do it in the same way. I don't think we would be performing live. I think we probably would still have been making music, because that's what we did. And Freddie was obsessed with music.

"Every time we think the band is done, that's that and it was wonderful, something else comes along."
Roger Taylor

Is it true that you appropriated the statue of Freddie that stood outside the Dominion Theatre in London after *We Will Rock You* finally ended its run there?
Yes, absolutely. You can see it from here. It was in a warehouse, costing money, so I said why don't they just put it on a lorry and bring it here, and we'll put it in the garden.

And is it true that Brian wasn't happy that you'd done it?
[Laughing] I think he was pissed off that he hadn't thought of it.

Is it fair to say that you and Brian were the source of a lot of the bickering in Queen?
That's absolutely true.

What sparked you both off?
Key changes, arrangements, "Why are you doing that? I can't hear the vocals". Freddie was the great peacemaker.

But here we are, more than fifty years later. The two of you *are* Queen, and you seem closer than ever.
We've had a long, up-and-down relationship. But we're brothers from another mother.

You must have been worried for him this year, with all his health problems?
Yes. He had a terrible time, one thing after another. But I think he's really on the mend now. He's dedicating his whole life – well, apart from saving the ant or whatever he's doing this week – to being fit and well. And I hope he's successful.

The tours you've done with Adam Lambert have been massively successful. But there are a lot of people who would love to hear new material from the band.
We did record a song, which we haven't actually finished. It's very good… I can't remember what it's called. I think we were still discussing what we should call it.

Do you want to record a brand new Queen album?
It would be nice to do some stuff. I wouldn't rule it out. Adam has said: "Any time you want me to sing on something…" If the other two decide "Let's do something", I'd be there. ▷

GETTY x2

Freddie Mercury at the Forum on March 3, 1977 in Inglewood, California.

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"One of Freddie's catchphrases was: 'We don't compromise.' But within the band we did. That's why we survived."

BRIAN MAY

Even without the pandemic, Brian May had a rough 2020. In early May he was left in agony after tearing a muscle in his buttocks during "a moment of overenthusiastic gardening", something he says sounds a lot funnier than it actually was. A few days later he suffered a "small" heart attack and a subsequent stomach hemorrhage that left him close to death. "Never a dull moment," he says wryly. Thankfully he's on his way back to full strength. "It's been a long climb. I'm not quite there yet, but I'm pretty good."

May has always seemed like a point of calmness and rationality amid the maelstrom that is Queen, although he can be protective to the point of spikiness in defending his band from their detractors. Today, speaking via Zoom from a sunlit room in his studio, the man who Roger Taylor describes as "an inherently decent person" is warm and engaging, even if he shares his bandmate's obstinate aversion to hanging out the bunting to mark Queen's half-century.

Even before the pandemic and your own health issues, you and Roger avoided any conspicuous celebration of Queen's fiftieth anniversary. Why is that?

We went through all these ideas with our team – let's celebrate being fifty years old. Then we thought that we'd rather just celebrate being here, being alive and being able to play.

Roger and I are first-class curmudgeons now. If something comes up, we go: "Do we really want to spend our time doing that? How much time do we have left, and what do we really want to be doing for this part of our lives that is worthwhile?" And the answer that always comes back is playing music.

Roger says you wanted to be a big band right from the point you met. Is that what you remember too?

Yeah. We had big, big dreams. We wanted it all, and we felt we had what it takes. It's funny, because if had been just me and Roger we would never have stuck together. Even though we're so well aligned in some respects, we're diametrically opposite in everything else. There's not a single subject we don't have opposite opinions about. We needed someone who would be the diplomat. And, strangely enough, Freddie was that guy.

Plenty of front: Freddie Mercury and John Deacon with Queen on Freddie's 38th birthday in 1984.

Everybody thinks that Freddie was that flyaway guy, but he was very pragmatic. If he saw a situation that was arising between me and Roger, he would manage to find a way through, a compromise. One of Freddie's great catchphrases was: 'We don't compromise.' But within the band we did. And that's why we survived.

What would have started the two of you bickering?

Oh, anything and nothing, A note, a tempo, a cup of coffee, a window…

But the two of you seem very fond of each other today. What changed?

It's very much like being brothers. There was always a fondness there, but there was a lot of competitive feelings. These days we realise the good stuff, because we've seen it all now and we value each other. We know that we're more powerful together than apart. If we truly get our energies aligned, magic happens.

What were the early days in Queen like? Was it fun, or hard work?

It was definitely fun. We would be carrying our own stuff into the gigs, setting it up with our roadie, dear old John Harris. We made our own popcorn to serve just before the gigs. It was all part of the preparation for the gig. And we'd invite managers and record label executives to the gigs. Of course they'd never turn up.

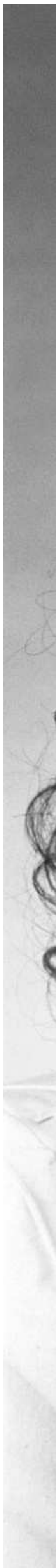
Did you ever play to an audience that really didn't get what you were doing?

Frequently. There's a famous story: we played this place called Ball's Park College, and we get booked to play their ball. It's a tiny thing, a couple of hundred kids there. We play the first set, and they're looking at us thinking why don't they play *Stairway To Heaven* or *Paranoid*.

In the interval, the secretary of the entertainment committee comes in and talks to us. She says: "Thanks, guys. Really, really good. I've had a request, though." And we went: "Oh yeah, what's the request?" "For the second half, can they have the disco instead of you guys?" And we went: "Give us the money… goodbye."

Early on, Genesis were sniffing around Roger to be their drummer. Did anyone try to tap you up?

Yes, Sparks approached me. It was after they had their major hit, *This Town Ain't Big Enough For The Both Of Us*, and we'd just had *Killer Queen* out. The two brothers [Ron and Russell Mael] came round my flat. They said: "Look, Brian, Queen isn't going anywhere, you're not going to have any more hits, but we're going to conquer the world." And I went: "Thanks but no thanks. I think I'm fine." ⊳



MAIN: GETTY; INSET: ALAMY

The Fantastic Four: (l-r) John Deacon, Brian May, Roger Taylor, Freddie Mercury.

"Sparks approached me [circa *Killer Queen*]. They said: 'You're not going to have any more hits, but we're going to conquer the world.'"

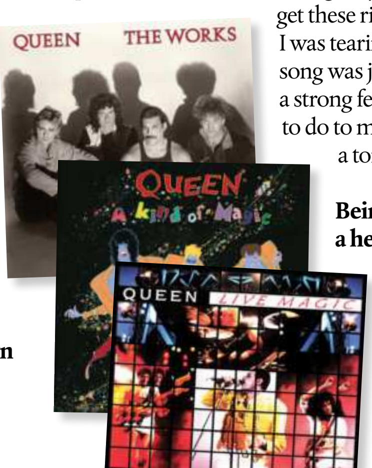
Brian May

Is it fair to say there was never a shortage of confidence in Queen?
I don't suppose there was. There was an insane confidence and a precocious belief in our own unique talents.

If you listen to *March Of The Black Queen*, from *Queen II*, you can hear the seeds of *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Is it fair to say that?
Totally. There's a whole line of stuff, going back to *My Fairy King* [from Queen's self-titled debut album]. Freddie had all these little mini-operas in his head from the start, which he'd write down on his dad's work notepaper. People say: "Were you shocked when people came in with the stuff for *Bohemian Rhapsody*?" No, because he was already doing that from the beginning.

***Bohemian Rhapsody* is rightly hailed as a classic. But it has overshadowed your own operatic epic, *The Prophet's Song*, which was also on *A Night At The Opera*…**
Well you're hitting a nerve there. I would have loved *The Prophet's Song* to have had a public life like *Bohemian Rhapsody*, but it never did. Mine was a distinct reaction to a dream I had, a very concrete dream, where I could see this strange prophet person and hear the riffs in my head.

It was a struggle for me. I remember being in Rockfield [studios] and listening to all the stuff Freddie was pounding out very confidently, and I wasn't feeling very confident. I was struggling to get these riffs in my head into shape, and I was tearing my hair out because the song was just out of my reach. But I had a strong feeling it was something I needed to do to move on. I think I was always a tortured soul, wasn't I?



Being in Queen seemed to be a heavy burden for you at certain points. Did you actually enjoy it?
It's tough, because you're always struggling to make your own identity work within the identity of the group. If you're in a situation and you feel like your voice isn't being heard, it's very negative – it motivates you to be mean and dogmatic and uncompromising and resentful. We all felt like that at various times. I know Roger felt it, John did as well. Freddie… I don't know. Freddie was always a cup-half-full person. A cup-completely-full person, really.

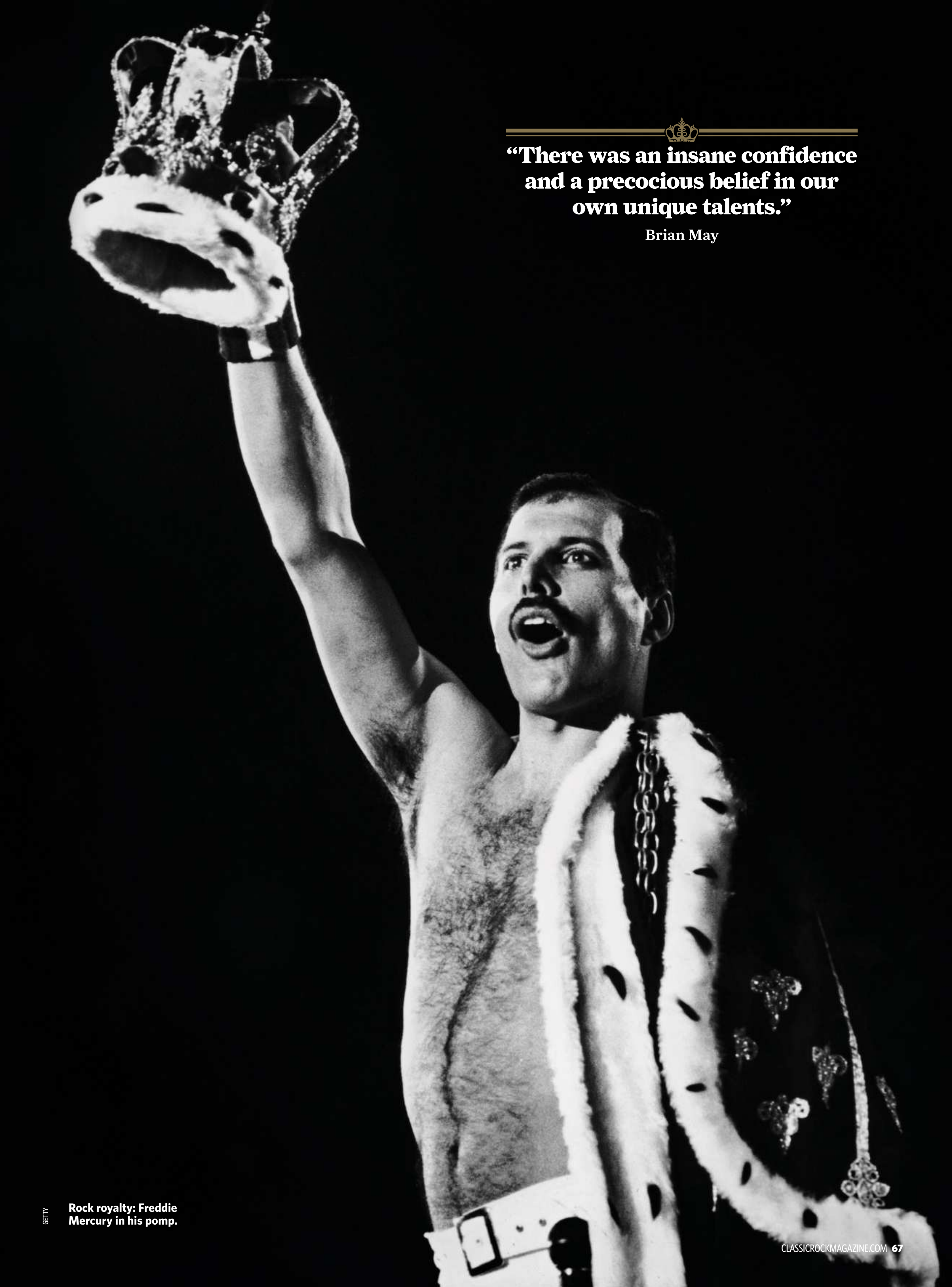
But we all left the band at various points in various album sessions. I remember being in Munich, when we were doing *The Game*, I think, walking around the English Garden, thinking: "This is over. I'm never going to do this again." And then you get back in there and you put your gloves back on.

The sniffier critics gave every hard rock band a tough time back then. But Queen seemed to take it more personally than other bands. Why was that?
There were quite a lot of those guys in the music press saying we were rubbish. So yes, it did hurt. What got us through was each other. We had the ability to be more vindictive and cruel to each ▷

ALAMY

“There was an insane confidence and a precocious belief in our own unique talents.”

Brian May



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Rock royalty: Freddie Mercury in his pomp.

Now I'm here: Queen + Adam Lambert at Madison Square Garden, NYC, August 6, 2019.

other than the press ever had the ability to do. So we got through by supporting each other, becoming a very strong family group.

A lot of the criticism was directed at Freddie personally. People wrote stuff they wouldn't get away writing these days. Was there an element of homophobia?
That's an interesting thought. I confess I've never thought about it. People didn't know Freddie was gay. We didn't know. And in the beginning I don't think Freddie knew. But he was, on the face of it, a very flippant, flamboyant, dancing-through-life person. And of course, that wasn't the whole person, it was a cloak he put on. But I think people did resent it. They thought it was arrogance.

Who were you closest to in the band?
Freddie, I think.

The image of Freddie Mercury was that he was unapproachable.
His image was of being unapproachable, but he was a very caring person, actually. He would give the impression that he was very flippant about everything, but he would always surprise you. If you had an argument, he'd come back a few days later and say: "I've been thinking…", and he'd have some further development and consequence of what we were talking about. He would be the diplomat.

You once said that being in Queen "fucked you up". What did you mean?
It's not an easy life. This is going to sound like a spoiled pop star, but it has its own stresses. You're exposing yourself to the public, you're putting yourself at risk of looking stupid the whole time, you're fighting various battles with the rest of the band or the organisation around you, and there's really no time to rest. You're swept away, you're nowhere near your school friends, your family, you're in some hotel room on the other side of the world. You live in this strange bubble. And it's not easy to adjust. Once you adjust to it, you can't *un*-adjust. It does screw you up.

"I still tend to walk into a room and assume that nobody knows who I am, and feel that I need to prove myself."

Brian May

The flipside of all that must be the time you spent playing. What did it feel like being on stage when Queen were in full flight?
It's pretty much the best feeling on earth. As a musician you dream of such things. But the reality is a thousand times better than the dream. That feeling of being able to make some kind of sound or gesture that connects in that way is incredible.

Queen always seemed too graceful to have their Spinal Tap moments. Did any of that stuff happen to you?
Oh yes. One of the great ones was in Holland. We had this wonderful rig that looked like a crown and would rise from the stage like a space ship. We're doing *We Will Rock You*, Freddie's one side, I'm on the other. That particular night the hoists had been wired up wrong, so instead of going up, it leaned over to one side. The whole thing goes up, big drama, then it went completely wrong. You've just got to laugh.

What's your favourite memory of Freddie during his last few years?
We had a wonderful time in Montreux, because we were away from prying eyes. We were a real family at that point. We didn't let anybody in. We didn't want anybody to molest Freddie in what were to be his last moments, though we weren't sure if they were his last moments at that point, because you have this kind of disbelief. Even though the evidence is in front of your eyes, you don't believe he's going to go. But it was a wonderful time. We were more supportive of each other in those last few years than ever before.

Do you still talk to him?
He's very much present. There are times when

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The Paul Rodgers-fronted Queen in the Netherlands in April 2005.

somebody asks you a question, and you don't really know what the answer is, and you think: "What would Fred say?" And you actually know what he would say. Even though he was fairly unpredictable, you knew how his brain worked.

If he was still here, do you think Queen would still exist?
Oh, without a doubt. Even in the glory days we'd wander off to the four corners of the earth, but we always came back to The Mothership. The Mothership would be alive and well, and we would all be coming back together to play, I'm sure of it. And Freddie is still part of the show today.

You had Queen with Paul Rodgers, but it didn't work out the way people thought it would. Were you worried that it would be the same with Adam Lambert?
People tell me all the time that after Queen we should have stopped and gone away and done something else. I think: "No, I don't think so. I was a part of building that, so I have a right to keep on." Should we play? Of course we should. It's in our blood. You get the question: "How can you have the audacity to give some of Freddie's lines to Adam Lambert to interpret?" Well we can because we do, and we do because we can. And Adam interprets these songs, he doesn't imitate Freddie. It keeps the songs alive.

Roger said you tried to record a new song with Adam a couple of years ago.
It was a song that we'd tried to adapt that had come from a friend. It had the makings of being a great song, but we couldn't crack it.

Hand on heart, do you ever envisage there being a brand-new Queen and Adam Lambert studio album?
I don't know. That's the honest answer. I really, really don't know. I can't see any objection to it, but it just hasn't happened so far.

When you look back on the last fifty-odd years and the life you've had, does it sometimes take you by surprise?
Constantly. I still tend to walk into a room and assume that nobody knows who I am, and feel that I need to prove myself. Those things don't go away. I wake up and I go: "My god, did that stuff really all happen?"

GETTY x2

GUARANTEED TO BLOW YOUR MIND

Eleven Queen songs you never hear on the radio but should.

GOIN' BACK
(Larry Lurex single, 1973)
The artist name on the single was Larry Lurex, but this languid cover of a Carole King classic was really a pre-fame Mercury, May and Taylor doing a favour for paymasters Trident. If Phil Spector had produced Queen, it would have sounded like this.

MY FAIRY KING
(*Queen*, 1973)
The cogs of Freddie Mercury's musical imagination were working overtime even on their first album. A multi-part mini-epic arriving in a swirl of leather, chiffon and black nail varnish, *My Fairy King* kicked off the journey that eventually culminated in *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

SOME DAY ONE DAY
(*Queen II*, 1974)
Queen veered close to prog on their second album, but Brian May's otherworldly semi-ballad took off somewhere else entirely. Hazy and unknowable, they never sounded like this again.

TENEMENT FUNSTER
(*Sheer Heart Attack*, 1974)
Queen's third album was an entire musical universe in itself. Amid the dandy pop, playful ragtime and proto-thrash metal aggro was Roger Taylor's love letter to the aspirational power of rock'n'roll.

THE PROPHET'S SONG
(*A Night At The Opera*, 1975)
Bohemian Rhapsody grabbed the headlines, and just about everything else, but Brian May's eight-minute epic is no less ambitious or insane, not least in the fever-dream chorale at its centre. Kicks back in with a killer riff too.

DROWSE
(*A Day At The Races*, 1976)
No member of Queen seemed as happy in their own skin as Roger Taylor, and *Drowse* reflected that. This was the drummer as an old man looking back at his younger self and saying: "Wasn't it *brilliant*"?

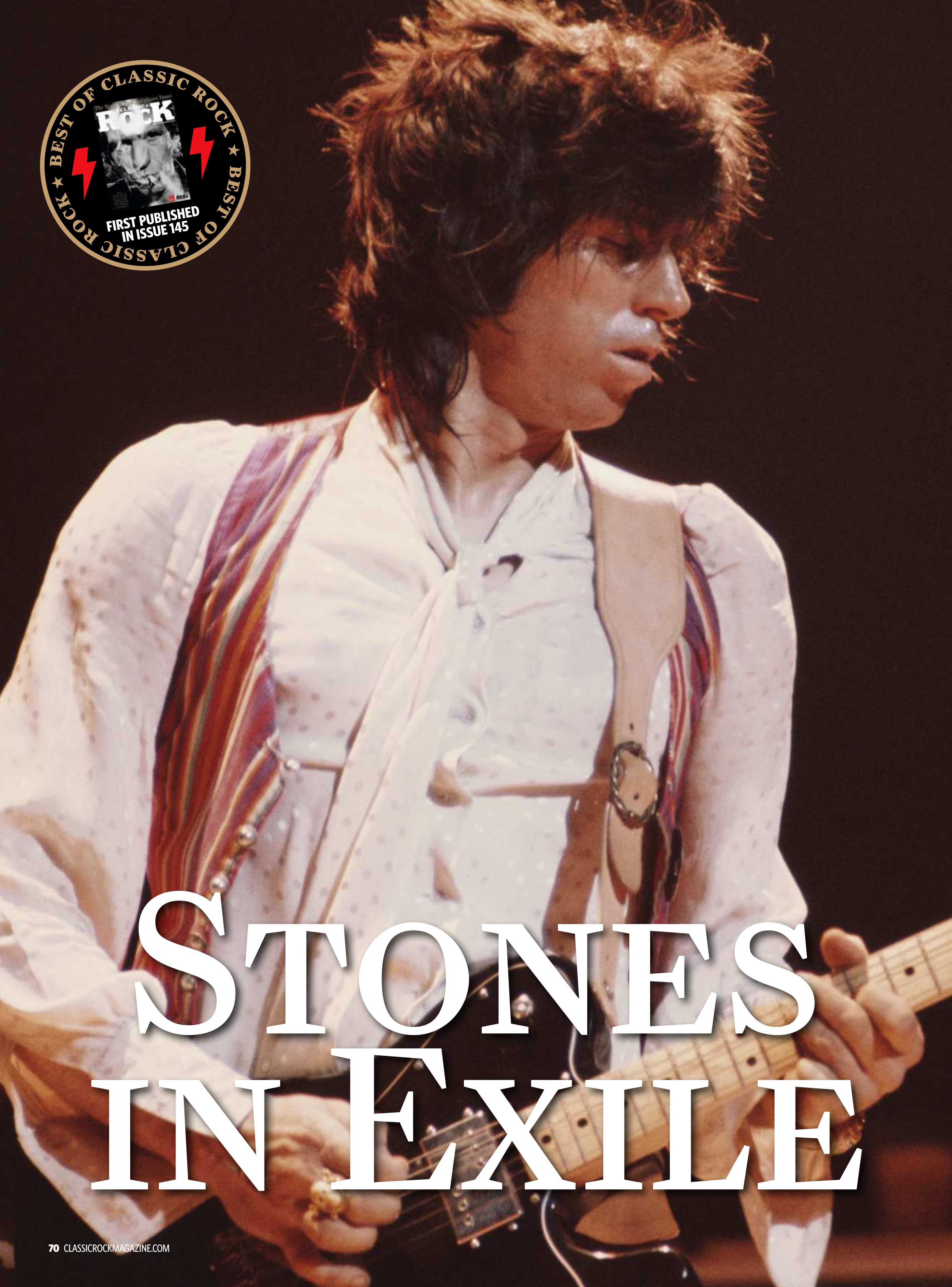
IT'S LATE
(*News Of The World*, 1977)
One of *the* great Queen tracks: six minutes of escalating sexual tension set to a blockbusting Brian May riff, it builds and builds before exploding in a big sweaty mess. When it's done you'll be reaching for a fag.

PUT OUT THE FIRE
(*Hot Space*, 1982)
Hot Space is the Queen album Queen fans love to hate. But it's not that bad, and this strutting anti-gun broadside stands shoulder to shoulder with their very best songs.

PRINCES OF THE UNIVERSE
(*A Kind Of Magic*, 1986)
Part of the soundtrack to cult classic *Highlander*, this sword-swinging monster sees May and Taylor cranking up the volume and having a blast doing it – a;though not as much as Mercury when he hollers '*Bring on the girls!*' with his tongue jammed firmly in his cheek.

RIDE THE WILD WIND
(*Innuendo*, 1991)
It's impossible not to view Queen's swansong album through the prism of impending mortality. *Ride The Wild Wind* pulses with lust-for-life romance, but a current of sadness swirls beneath it. The line '*Gonna leave it all behind/Get out of the rat race*' is equally defiant and heartbreaking.

TIME TO SHINE
(*The Cosmos Rocks*, 2000)
May and Taylor's union with Paul Rodgers worked better when they weren't trying to sound like Queen, as this soaring highlight from their sole album together proves. It makes you wonder what would have happened if they'd stuck it out.



STONES IN EXILE

Keith Richards and Charlie Watts on the fights, drugs and chaos that was the making of *Exile On Main St…*

Words: **Ian Fortnam**

Keith Richards is completely out of control. While barrelling through North London on an intoxicated mercy dash to visit Anita Pallenberg (at Bowden House, Harrow, where she's undergoing heroin detox), Keith swerves to avoid a truck. As he hurtles across a mini roundabout straight into the wall of a neat Wembley abode, his jangled brain considers the potentially catastrophic consequences. Obviously, he's not going to die: mortality's something that only ever happens to the other guy. He is, however, carrying a chemical cargo to gladden the heart of any ambitious cop.

And so, within seconds of his massive Bentley screeching to a halt in the demolished remains of the garden wall, Keith is up, out and frantically disposing of his stash. It's at this point that he's surprised to hear a familiar voice: "Hello Keith, how are you doing?"

It's the Stones' keyboard player, Nicky Hopkins – the man whose garden he's just crashed into.

"My steaming Bentley's in the middle of their rose bushes," remembers Keith, 38 years down the line, "I'm tossing capsules, because I can hear the sirens already and suddenly there's Nicky saying: 'Come inside and have a cup of tea while we wait for the policemen.' I knew then that God was on my side."

And not for the first – or indeed last – time. Keith's crashed his car on so many occasions that even he can't be sure just how many. "You cover a lot of miles; you're bound to bump into things," he shrugs.

"Anyway, we got out of that one: my farewell to England basically, it was only about a week later that we moved out to Nellcôte."

And into exile.

Keith Richards

"My steaming Bentley's in the middle of their rose bushes and I'm tossing capsules cos I can hear the sirens coming."

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To say that his reputation precedes him is an immeasurable understatement. The nascent art of rock journalism found its vocabulary while grasping for superlatives to describe the man we're about to meet. As rock'n'roll peaked as both a commercial and countercultural phenomenon in the late 60s and early 70s, Keith Richards was the yardstick by which all others were measured.

He was the human riff, the diseased crow-alike that, if he moved next door to you your lawn wouldn't wait around to die, it'd move to a better neighbourhood. Gypsy, pirate, Glimmer Twin, fugitive, Jack Daniel's-driven insect man from the Planet Cool. One week he was the world's most elegantly wasted human being, the next its most stylishly dissipated. More often than not he was simply 'Rock'n'roll Himself'.

But that was then, and while we're ostensibly here in New York City's exquisite Mercer Hotel to revisit those halcyon days when the Rolling Stones, officially the greatest rock'n'roll band in the world, were recording their ultimate masterpiece *Exile On Main St*, we're also here to check out Keith as he is now. We're all aware of the reputation, so what of the reality? With his eighth decade looming, how is 'Rock'n'roll Himself' holding up?

Keith is a caricature made up of certain familiar elements: the rolling gait is surprisingly unmistakable, as are the brown eyes that flash from humorous warmth to soul-freezing danger in a fraction less than a wink. Then there's the single most instantly recognisable suite of jewellery in rock: the handcuff bracelet (a reminder to the one-time jailbird that freedom cannot always be taken for granted) and skull ring (the great leveller; as Keith himself puts it: "Skulls remind us that underneath it all, we are all the same").

Keith veritably bounces into the room. He's carrying an opaque paper cup that punctuates his every pronouncement with emphatic clunks of ice. It gives every indication of being a soft drink, but it's clearly not. It's an incongruous imposter with a bendy straw. It doesn't fit. The absence of a characteristic whisky tumbler gives the impression that Keith would rather not advertise the fact that he's drinking – would rather give the impression that he's 'just saying no'.

There's nothing surreptitious about his continuing allegiance to the fags though. Yet even after all these years his ashtray skills remain rudimentary. As his arms flail emphatically the fallout's inescapable. As we settle down to spool back through time to 1971, the official Rolling Stones logo Zippo lighter sparks up yet another gasper and seemingly refuelled by an invigorating lungful of fresh nicotine, Keith's away.

"It was called *Exile* because we were basically booted out of England. It was either that or sweep the streets."

It might sound dramatic, but the Rolling Stones were in dire financial straits at the dawn of the 1970s. Their erstwhile manager, Allen Klein, with whom they were currently in ongoing litigation, had misled them into believing that they were far wealthier than they actually were. Consequently, they owed a fortune to the Inland Revenue and, with top rate taxation under the Labour Government running at 93 per cent, were unable to clear enough earnings to pay their back taxes. Keith, then being unsuccessfully busted on a regular basis, took this high rate of tax personally. It seemed like yet another way for the establishment to persecute the Stones.

Mick and Keith were being hounded by the law during the early 70s.

"They couldn't get you in jail, so they put the economics on you, the old double whammy," he says. "So the feeling within the band was we've got to show them we're made of sterner stuff and prove you couldn't break the Stones just by kicking them out of England. We all looked at each other and said, 'Okay, we'll do it on the lam'."

So the band and their families reluctantly decamped for the South of France. "Well, if it's going to be France, it's got to be the Riviera, pal."

Somerset Maugham liked to call it 'a sunny place for shady people' – it just seemed to fit. Keith moved into Villa Nellcôte, Villefranche-sur-mer. During the war Nellcôte had served as the Gestapo headquarters (there were still swastikas embossed onto the air vents) and as no other suitable recording space could be found in the area, the band chose to record in its basement using the mobile recording studio that they'd previously rented out to the BBC to record sporting events.

"Finally this truck came in handy: a great control room on wheels, but there was a lot of slap-dash improvising because we'd never recorded outside of a studio before and this basement was… well, I can smell it now: every time I look at that cover, I can pick up a certain damp, oily, dusty flavour."

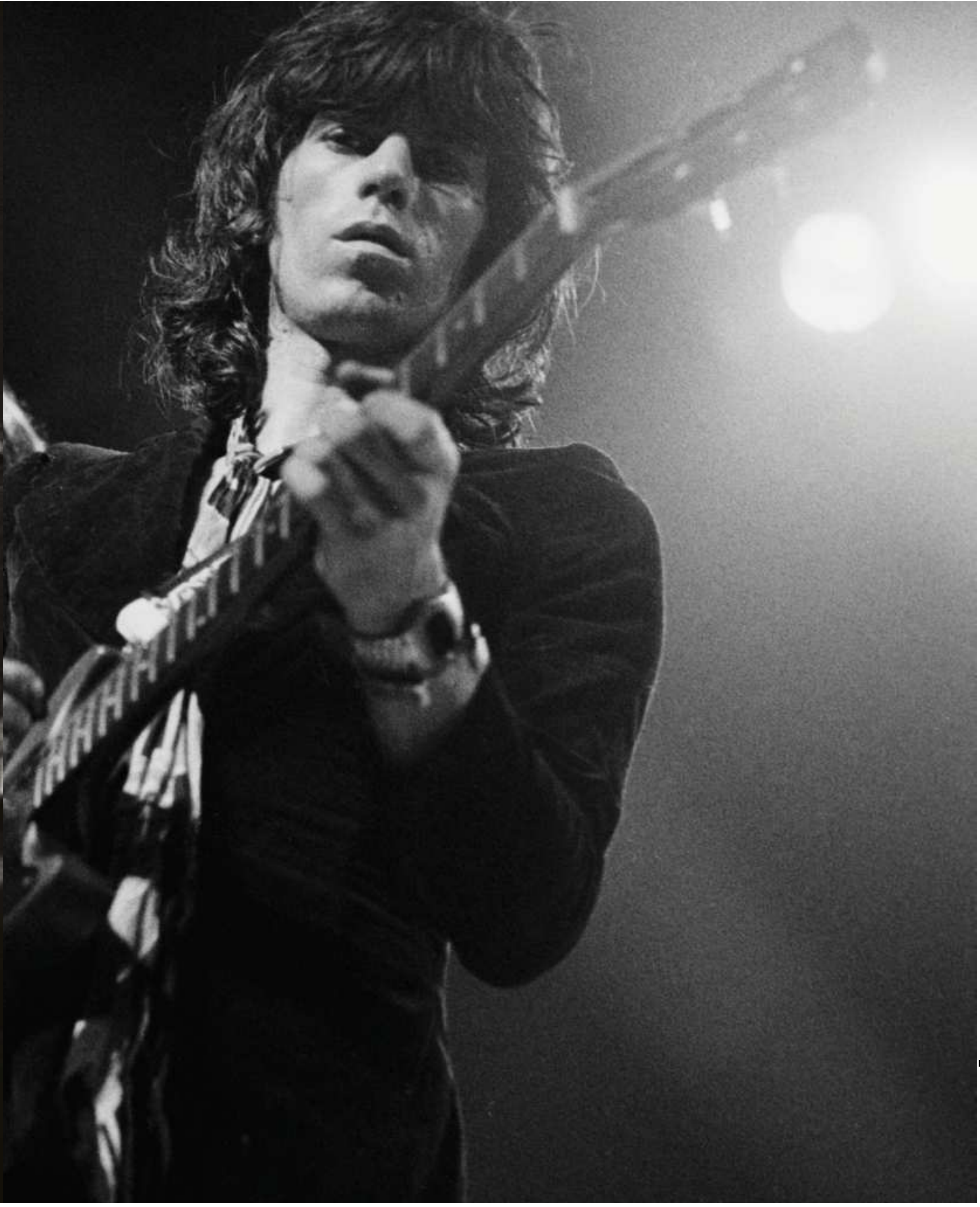
Nellcôte's basement was split into various compartments and the mobile truck was parked outside. Communication between the players, producer Jimmy Miller and engineer Andy Johns was therefore, at best, haphazard. But as the summer of '71 unfolded, the Rolling Stones' extended sessions, sometimes all-day, sometimes all-night, gradually bore fruit.

"A lot of the songs started off with an idea. Mick's playing harp, you join in and before you knew it you had a track in the making and an idea working. It might not be the finished track; you're not trying to force it. As my father used to say: 'Keith, there's a difference between scratching your ass and tearing it to bits'."

Mick meanwhile was often absent from the sessions, attending to his pregnant wife Bianca who he'd married a month previously ("It didn't last long," says Keith. "I knew it wouldn't").

Drugs-wise, when the Stones first arrived at Nellcôte, "Nobody was particularly dirty," says Richards, "but I was probably the dirtiest of the lot… but what else is new?"

Things got rapidly out of hand on the arrival of playboy, dealer and occasional racing driver, Tommy Weber and his 'wedding present to Mick



and Bianca': a kilo of cocaine he'd smuggled through French customs taped under the T-shirts of his two young sons, Jake and Charley. The gift never made it to the happy couple, not surprising considering that it was Anita who'd instigated the plan whilst 'detoxing' back in London with Weber's wife, Puss (who, incidentally, would be dead within the month).

Events escalated yet further when Keith and Tommy Weber decided to spend the day go-karting, and with Keith at the controls of a wheeled vehicle, the inevitable happened: "Oh yeah, I stripped off most of the left side of my back," he says. "I hooked his back wheel and turned mine over. That was an interesting sensation."

It's been suggested that in order to deal with the pain from this back injury, Keith resorted to opiates and the spectre of heroin descended on Nellcôte. "No, that's all bullshit. People like to second guess my drug habits and they don't know what the fuck they're talking about."

Keith's mood changes immediately and he flashes a glance that can freeze the blood in your veins. Ian McLagan (former Faces keyboard player and occasional Stones sideman) once told me that "Keith always had a .38 with him." And how, after his former confidant Spanish Tony Sanchez betrayed his trust by writing his fix 'n' tell *Up And Down With The Rolling Stones* memoir, Keith didn't threaten him verbally, he simply showed him a revolver. A simple reminder: 'what goes around comes around'.

Up until now, Keith has been conviviality personified; a kindly old uncle in a rakishly-tilted, mustard-coloured fedora hat. With his hair newly trimmed of the piratical tchotchkes he'd previously accumulated and finally allowed to fade to a distinguished grey, he gives every indication of being a man who's mellowed and renounced his position as rock's Don Corleone.

But that look, where his right, Kohl-smudged eye widens slightly, his left narrows and his whole body pivots forward shoulder first, is the physical equivalent of producing a concealed weapon.

Say hello to His Satanic Majesty. Now here's the Keef of legend…

"I'm off and I'm on," he leers. "It's no big deal to me. Cold turkey? I spit on it. Oh, agony… It's no fun, but… At that time I was no more out of it than anybody else. Charlie was hitting the Cognac like a motherfucker, Mick loves his wine – but that didn't even occur to us. People did what they wanted to do. It was like, 'Are you going to go into that room and come up with something? If you do that I don't give a damn if you're snorting God.' What fuel you're running on is immaterial, as long as you come up with the goods."

With an emphatic clank of ice Keith settles back, his point made.

While Villa Nellcôte had been temporarily occupied by the Rolling Stones and an extended entourage of guests, n'er-do-wells and hangers-on for recording and partying purposes, it was also Keith Richards' home.

Consequently, Keith would occasionally disappear upstairs for hours on end, sometimes at crucial points during recording. Not to conjure up Lucifer over exotic narcotics with Anita (who, it should be noted, the majority of the party were genuinely terrified of), but to set about the task of putting his 18-month old son, Marlon, to bed in spite of the ongoing tumult below.

"Kids can get used to anything," he shrugs.

But it's a pretty strange arrangement…

"Go tell it to the gypsies," he says. "What's so weird about it? What am I going to do? Send him to a prep school in a silly little uniform? This is what dad does. He was my navigator. At five years old he could read a map – to tell me when we're getting near the border, because I've got to dump the shit, *you know what I mean?*"

Ah yes: 'You know what I mean?' Keith's colourful discourse is liberally peppered with these five words, though they've long since evolved into a single almost unintelligible ejaculation – not unlike a lorry changing gear – that punctuates his every anecdote. Like the one about Nellcôte's French chef…

"Big, fat Jacques, yeah, he was a dealer too. Every Thursday he went to Marseille to pick up… [he checks himself and laughs: a fruity death rattle].

“ KEITH RICHARDS ”

People second guess my drug habits. I'm off and I'm on. It's no big deal to me. Cold turkey? I spit on it.

He also blew up the kitchen… some of this is cartoon shit, *you know what I mean?*"

Or Keith's only – as he remembers it – run-in with Monsieur Plod Le Gendarme: "I was with Spanish Tony in Beaulieu, the next town along from Villefranche, and we got pulled over by the harbour master and his bosun. Anyway, they took us into this office. They were big guys and Spanish Tony smells trouble and says: 'Get ready. They're gonna do us.' I said: 'Right, I'll watch your back' and Tony went into action. Talk about Bruce Lee, *you know what I mean?* Tony leapt onto this table, picked up a chair, and put the both of them down. Within two seconds these guys are groaning and going 'Zut alors!' and all this shit. 'Mon Dieu!' 'Sacre bleu,' and other curses in French. I stood on one while Tony finished off the other and we left."

End of story? Not quite…

"A week later there's a knock at the door and there's the Gendarme with the lovely kepi, all smiles, with some papers. They'd filed charges of course, and French courts are weird, you go through this charging structure and it's a totally different system, you're guilty until you're proven innocent over there, which is an interesting twist, *you know what I mean?* Not that it makes much difference in the long run, I've found. Anyway, it all drifted away, but that was my only brush with the constabulary in France."

Do such things usually drift away so easily? Previous reports of the incident suggest that a few signed Stones albums helped to smooth things out for Keith and that Spanish Tony, as the man ultimately wielding the chair, was fined $12,000 in his absence (which Keith paid). Bill Wyman remembers Keith having another brush with the Gendarmerie after his car was in collision (what are the chances?) with some Italian tourists, but hey, who's counting?

Anyway, Keith's side-tracking us: back to *Exile*…

Part of the magic of *Exile On Main St* stemmed from the working relationship that had developed between Keith and fellow guitarist Mick Taylor.

"Brian [Jones] and I would swap roles. There was no defined line between lead and rhythm guitar, but with Mick's style I had to readjust the shape of the band and it was beautifully lyrical. He was a lovely lead player. I loved playing with Mick Taylor. I was probably more shocked than anybody else when he decided he was going to leave. 'What, are you crazy? What d'you think you're gonna do, pal?' And sure enough: nothing."

He clearly thought that he had to match your lifestyle which, obviously, not everybody can.

"I don't know if he thought he had to. He was just sort of drawn into it. It's like a vortex… *ah…hur… hur… hur…* [the most evil laugh of the day so far: like an extended, gasping death rattle that never quite touches the sides]. Don't get too close to the whirlpool, *you know what I mean?*"

One of the most significant visitors to Nellcôte during the summer was Gram Parsons: a kindred spirit of Keith's who harboured hopes that the pair would record a country album together.

"There was an idea – but nothing in concrete," says Keith. "We'd all become very good friends, especially myself and Gram, and I think Mick [Jagger] looked a little bit askance at it. Mick doesn't like me to have anybody around me… And at that time, Mick's regular response to: 'Hey Mick, this is a mate of mine,' was [adopts sniffy, unimpressed Mick voice] 'Hmm, who are *you?*' [a laugh that starts out as emphysema and ends up as a knackered motorbike clearing its carburettor]. You could say either he was being protective or that there was a streak of jealousy there, *you know what I mean?* I'd say yes to both."

And at this point it seemed that the unwritten law was that no members of the Rolling Stones made solo albums. "Yeah, that would have been an absolute no-no at that time. That would mean that you weren't happy with the band. That came later, Mick started that."

Would you have ever made a solo album if that hadn't happened?

"No, of course not… I'm glad I did though, I'm glad Mick forced me to do that because I prefer *Talk Is Cheap* and *Main Offender* to *She's The Boss* [a satisfied chuckle as the ice clanks]. Mick thought it would be easy and found that it wasn't. He didn't quite cotton onto the fact that, yeah he's a good singer, but the important thing was… the Stones. Mick, given his enormous ego, which every lead singer needs, thought: 'Ah, they're just sidemen'… Which led to World War III."

Mick's always seemed to have something of an ambivalent attitude to *Exile*… "Well, that's Mick. Mick's never gonna tell you the truth [long pause, pops the old right eyeball for emphasis]. Who are you to get the truth out of him? To the point where he doesn't know what the truth is, or even if there is such a thing as the truth. There are a whole lot of conflicting emotions and ideas there… You're just the damn singer, man. But what do you expect of guys that have been together for 40-odd years? The whole thing works off of certain abrasions… Pointless fighting is useless, but if certain things come out of conflict, it's worth the fight."

It's the grit that makes the pearl.

"Exactly… and God help the oyster."

"You've seen Keith?" Charlie Watts, the world's most effortlessly dapper human being, sets aside his characteristically laconic, ever-so-slightly detached demeanour for a second and – fully engaged, with eyebrows raised – enquires: "How was he? Well?"

He smiles broadly at the news that Keith is, if anything, very well. In fact, the first adjective that springs to mind to describe his state of health is 'bouncy'. And, with a degree of understatement that surely only he could muster, chuckles: "He's funny, he is."

Charlie Watts, immaculately attired in a gangster-cut, navy blue, broadly pin-striped suit, Cambridge blue, round-collared shirt and Oxford blue, Windsor-knotted tie (complete with pin, naturally), cuts quite a dash.

Keith clearly thinks of Charlie what everybody else thinks of Keith – that he's the heart and soul of the Rolling Stones personified: "I can never say enough about Charlie Watts," Keith had told me a couple of weeks before. "It was the luckiest day for this band and myself personally the day that we got to play with such a drummer. With Charlie I never have to worry where the backbeat is. I mean, hey – if you're talking about rock'n'roll, the drummer is the hidden hero basically."

So what was it that Charlie saw in the fledgling Stones that finally coerced him to join? "A job," says Charlie, somewhat unromantically. There's no old flannel here, not a single scrap of diplomacy, his honesty is disarming, his openness total.

"I was in about three bands when I joined them. It was like whoever came up with somewhere to play, you'd go and play."

Charlie was distinctly unimpressed with the band's decision to move to France in '71. "I was told I had to move and I said 'No, I'm not'."

My suggestion that, as a non-songwriter his need to escape British taxation was probably not as great as that of Mick and Keith (who, then as now, commanded the lion's share of the Stones' earnings) is met with a withering: "It had nothing to do with song-writing, I don't know where you've dreamed that up."

Anyway, once it was explained to Charlie that financially a move to France was the only way forward for the band, he eventually capitulated. Did it ever occur to him that life outside of the Stones – who were not only being forced out of the country by taxation but were also being constantly hounded by the forces of law and order – might have been simpler?

"It never crossed my mind. Keith was really getting the hassle, but then Keith was a stronger drug man than anyone. I wasn't into drugs… I mean, I smoked, but everyone I admired was either a junkie or an alcoholic. It's not something to be proud of, but it's true. That world seemed very glamorous to me. It was the world that I wanted to be in from the age of 13. I didn't want to be a junkie personally, but that's the world I loved. I used to go to the all-nighters at The

" CHARLIE WATTS "

Everyone I admired was either a junkie or an alcoholic. It's not something to be proud of, but it's true...

Flamingo Club [in London's Wardour Street]. And, though I didn't know it at the time, half the people in there were junkies. That's where I first met Ginger Baker… So Keith suddenly taking a liking to it wasn't a shock to me at all."

Charlie has a vinyl copy of *Exile On Main St* open on the table in front of him, so it should be relatively easy to steer him back to the subject at hand. But as our tête-à-tête takes place in Dean Street, Soho, a series of stone's throws from The Flamingo, Old Compton Street's 2i's Coffee Bar and Archer Street (where as a jobbing jazz drummer pre-Stones Charlie would often tout for work), he's easily side-tracked.

Keith had told me that, with Charlie and Bill Wyman living an hour's drive away from Nellcôte, a lot of *Exile*'s recordings were made in their absence – with (in the case of *Happy*) producer Jimmy Miller on drums and Keith doubling on bass. I put this snippet of insider information to Charlie.

"We played together on *Happy*," he says.

Oh. According to Charlie, rather than being an hour's drive away, he was actually living at Nellcôte at the time.

Keith Richards? Memory lapse? *With his reputation?*

Whatever, Charlie's extremely generous in his praise of Jimmy Miller both as a producer and as a drummer: "I loved Jimmy Miller," he says. "I thought he was the best producer we ever had. Jimmy was a hands-on type of guy. When we played he could never keep still, so he'd always be banging something; a drum or a cow bell [that's him at the start of *Honky Tonk Women*]. But Jimmy was lucky; he had a good band to record back then."

Ah yes, now we're getting somewhere.

So how was working with Bill Plummer?

"Who's Bill Plummer?"

He played stand-up bass on *Rip This Joint* and *All Down The Line*.

"What, on here?" Charlie asks, gesturing toward *Exile*'s cover…

Anyway, moving on. Were you surprised when Mick announced that he was to marry Bianca?

"No."

Really? He'd always seemed to be very non-conformist up to that point and then suddenly, out of the blue, he's the marrying kind?

"Mick is a very middle-class boy from Dartford," says Charlie. "Keith is, and was always, much more outside of everything than Mick. Mick was never what he wrote: he was never Satanic Majesties and he was never a Street Fighting Man, but he wrote bloody good songs that created this persona. So for him to marry… It's what people did. I don't think it's ever suited him though. He's never really liked it… But he seems very, very happy at the moment."

Keith's basement room at Nellcôte became a makeshift studio during the sessions for *Exile*

While Charlie doesn't mind talking about his summer in *Exile* he'd much rather wax lyrical about the drummers he admired in his youth (Phil Seaman, Earl Phillips), but if he absolutely has to talk about the Stones, this is the period – and indeed line-up – that he remembers with the greatest fondness.

"I don't think Keith is as enamoured of Mick Taylor as I was. It was like having Carlos Santana in the band. For me it was wonderful. Mick would go off, and you'd go off with him. It was like the jazz thing, really. He gave terrific beauty to the

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Charlie was unimpressed with the decision to ship out to France.

tracks he played on: *Loving Cup* was a good one. For me, that's always been our best and most productive period: that *Exile* era."

"What came out of us on *Exile*," says Keith Richards in a blur of waving arms, jewellery and fag ash, "was what we'd learnt playing America for eight years. We were working an awful lot in America, and learning first hand what we'd only learnt before from records. Just soaking up American culture and realising that, you know… they love an Englishman, if you play it right."

Keith's been playing it right for four decades now: the English rapscallion; exiled from his homeland; trotting the globe; the quintessential lovable rogue; Terry-Thomas with a skull ring.

"Yeah right… 'You bounder!' 'Blast!' all of that." Keith grins, adopting the requisite accent.

It's not much of a stretch, to be honest. Beneath the superficial damage wrought by miscellaneous recreational toxins, Keith's customary enunciation is more that of a charm-laden, public school rotter than a Dartford-encumbered, art school drop-out.

The Keef of legend – the Keef that sells magazines – was partly created by a pre-punk 1970s music press in search of an anti-establishment figurehead. While Keith was occasionally vilified by the red-top tabloids, rock journalism's finest were regularly reinventing him as 'the world's most elegantly wasted human being' while crediting him with a degree of infamy and indulgence that could only ever have accorded him iconic status. He was the Patron Saint of Rock Misbehaviour; the Minister for Unhealth. He sold an awful lot of newspapers.

"They fed us the material and we played up to it, basically," he admits. "You wanna meet Keith Richards? Which Keith Richards would you like to meet?"

Whenever Keith makes a joke it's reported as fact because it makes for good copy and compounds the myth of Keef: Marlon's first words being 'room service', the Swiss blood changes, the snorting of the ashes [Keith greets each of these self-seeded myths with a fruity snigger].

"I enjoy finding out what other people find interesting because from the inside out it's all very amusing."

You're not a serial litigant: the likes of Spanish Tony publish their allegations without fear of a court case. Do you enjoy the notoriety that's been thrust upon you?

"As long as they talk about us who gives a shit? *You know what I me-ahh-ahh-nnng-ah…*" [He drifts off into a bit of a boggle-eyed yodel – ice clanks, ash flies, arms wave – it's classic Keith.]

With Keith long considered the essence of rock'n'roll distilled, there's more than a frisson of déjà vu when you finally meet the real thing: I've never met a band that didn't include at least one counterfeit Keef. But what of the genuine article; who is the real Keith Richards?

"Hey, I'm a family man," Keith soberly asserts, "And I have been since I was 26. I know people always like to make you all very cut and dried and simple: 'Oh, he's a fucking maniac'. *Yanarrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr* [an outboard motor-styled 'you- know-what-I-mean']? And I can be, when I have the time for it, but I'm also growing up. I pace myself. I love my families. I have several – extended. And they all love each other. I'm extremely blessed with my ladies who all, thank God, get along [raps the table three times]. Even I couldn't be that kind of Keith Richards all the time.

"When I'm at home I do as I'm told: 'Yes, darling, no, darling', like any other guy. I avoid conflict as much as possible, especially domestically, but at the same time I know there's a streak in me that given the opportunity will show you what Keith Richards can do [boggles the eye, lurches piratically, clanks, pouts and… relaxes]. But I feel no compulsion.

"I'm not a Keith Moon, who felt he had to top himself every time until he finally did. I'm not a maniac. But when I want a good time, I have one. And I take people with me, because then I find out what I actually did. There are a lot of things that I've done that even I wouldn't believe, except I've got 59 witnesses, and you can't argue with numbers."

Do you still feel, if indeed you ever have, indestructible?

"Not quite, but almost. I've never felt any compulsion to prove it. I never went for this image. An image is like a ball and chain – it's always there and you're dragging it behind you, and people, including myself, are more complicated than that. I can be a real pussycat, *hurhurhurhurhur*. I've never felt driven to live up to this image that they've made of me. That's a mug's game, a sucker shot. But I don't mind using it occasionally… especially if I want to get a reservation."

As we wind down our summit, I reveal to Keith that my Christmas celebrations always commence on his birthday, December the 18th: Keithmas Day.

"It's a real good date," says Sagittarius Keith, who was 66 last Keithmas. "You can't go wrong: half man, half horse and a licence to shit in the street."

I always open my Christmas presents to the sound of Ronnie Spector singing *Frosty The Snowman*, what about you? I venture, in the hope that Keith will reveal a little more of himself.

"I've done several things with Ronnie, very few of them to do with *Frosty The Snowman*." He leers suggestively before quickly throttling back from boggle-eyed lechery to silk-cravat suavity. "She's a very good friend of mine, lives not very far way from me up in Connecticut. A great girl, and in her day… shit… I've been blessed."

And with that Rock'n'roll Himself tips his fedora, clanks his ice, sparks his Zippo and is gone.

He's the best Keith Richards I've ever met, and there's been a few.

“ **KEITH RICHARDS** ”

I'm a family man. I can be a maniac but I'm also growing up. Even I couldn't be that Keith Richards all the time.

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"THIS IS THE PERFECT WAY TO FINISH"

In 2013, the comeback the world had been waiting for finally happened: **Black Sabbath** reunited to make their final album, *13*.

Words: **Paul Elliott** Portrait: **Ross Halfin**

The title of the new Black Sabbath album, *13*, worries Ozzy Osbourne. During the making of this album, the first that Osbourne has recorded with Sabbath in 35 years, guitarist Tony Iommi has been battling the potentially fatal blood cancer lymphoma, and drummer Bill Ward has quit the band in a dispute over a contract he described as "un-signable".

To paraphrase an old blues song, if it wasn't for bad luck, Black Sabbath would have no luck at all. And for Osbourne, the new album's title is at best grimly ironic. At worst, it's tempting fate.

"I'm superstitious," he says. "So I'm not crazy about calling the album *13*. Every time this band gets together, some shit happens. Somebody – usually me – will fall down a flight of stairs and nearly fucking kill himself. There's always a spanner in the works. So when Tony got diagnosed with cancer, I was like, 'What next?' You're almost waiting for a bomb to go off or a fucking earthquake."

Ozzy laughs when he says this, on the phone from his home in Los Angeles. It is only a few days later that it becomes apparent why he's in LA and not, as previously scheduled, in London with Iommi and bassist Geezer Butler.

News breaks of a crisis in Ozzy's relationship with wife Sharon. It's revealed that they have been living apart since he relapsed into drinking alcohol and using prescription drugs. Ozzy will make a confession via Facebook, describing his behaviour as "insane". Sharon subsequently states on US chat show *The Talk* that Ozzy has been in "a very dark place", but quashes rumours that they are separating.

When he speaks to *Classic Rock*, Ozzy gives no indication of the trouble in his personal life. His focus is on the new album, and of the struggle to get it made. "With Black Sabbath, nothing is ever easy," he says. "And it's always, always been the same."

The new Sabbath album has been a long time coming. It's now 16 years since the band's first reunion tour with Ozzy. Up until 2005 they had continued to tour, on and off, despite Bill Ward having time out to recover from a heart attack in 1998. But while Sabbath flourished as a live act, making new music was more difficult. They recorded two new songs, *Psycho Man* and *Selling My Soul*, which were added to the 1998 live album *Reunion*. But both songs were underwhelming. And an attempt to record a new album in 2001 with producer Rick Rubin was aborted when Osbourne chose to make another solo album, *Down To Earth*.

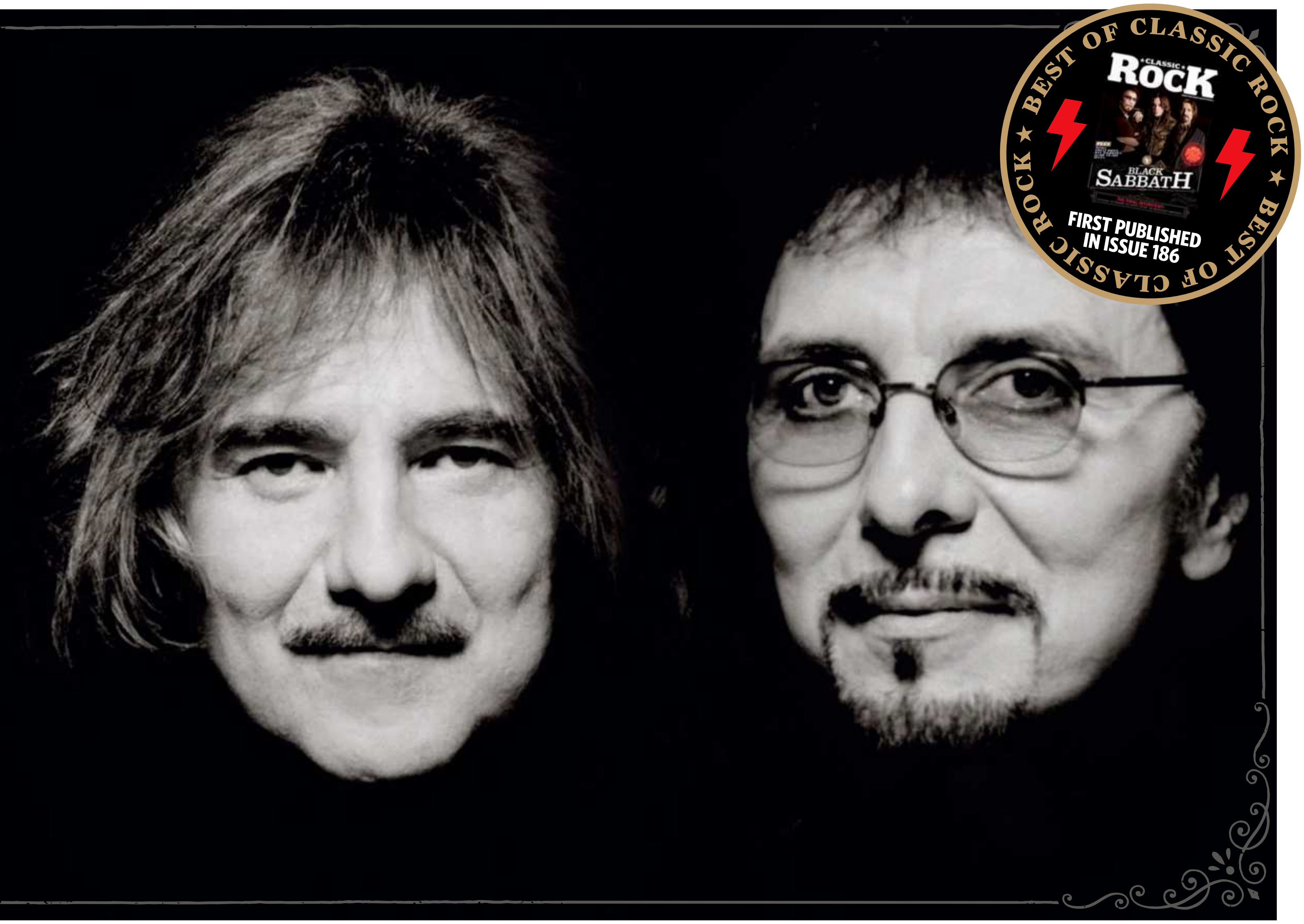
After their 2005 tour, it seemed that Ozzy and Sabbath had gone as far as they could together. Ozzy resumed his solo career. Iommi and Butler reunited with Ronnie James Dio, the singer who had replaced Ozzy in Black Sabbath in 1979, and Vinny Appice, the drummer who had replaced Bill Ward in 1980. This group, named Heaven & Hell, released the album *The Devil You Know* in 2009, and planned to make another. But on May 16, 2010, Ronnie James Dio succumbed to stomach cancer. And it was on the day after Dio's funeral that Ozzy called Tony Iommi.

Iommi knew what was coming. "Ozzy told me he missed the old band," he says. "He asked if I wanted to get it back together." But both Iommi and Butler had a proviso. "We wanted to tour again," Butler says. "But we didn't want to do it without anything new to play."

And so, finally, a new Black Sabbath album was born. It's not quite what was planned. Without Bill Ward, this is not the full, original Black Sabbath. But in Rage Against The Machine drummer Brad Wilk, they found a capable substitute, and with Rick Rubin again installed as producer, they have created an album comparable to their classic 70s work – the albums that defined heavy metal.

Above all, what this album represents – for Black Sabbath, and for Tony Iommi in particular – is a triumph over the very worst of adversity.

"When the doctor said it was cancer, I just thought, 'Well, that's it for me,'" Iommi says. "I would go to bed at night wondering, 'Will I be here tomorrow morning?' You think all the doomiest bloody things. But in the end you realise that life carries on. And the one thing that you've got to do, more than anything, is fight for it."



Geezer Butler believes that *13* would be a fitting end to Black Sabbath's career. "If this is the last thing we ever do, fine," he says. "We've completed what we were put on earth to do."

Butler turns 64 on July 17, and says he would happily retire at the end of the band's current world tour. After a 44-year career in rock'n'roll, he now prefers to live quietly, spending most of his time at his home in Los Angeles with wife Gloria – also his manager – and their six dogs and seven cats. "I rarely go out," he says. "I just keep to myself."

Iommi's illness has had a profound effect on Geezer and Ozzy. It has drawn them all closer together. Even so, they have little contact outside of their work with Black Sabbath.

They are never far from each other. Ozzy's main home is also in LA. And where Iommi lives, in an upscale suburb of Birmingham, Butler has a house on the same road, just a mile away. Butler laughingly admits that it's not unlike a heavy metal version of *Stella Street*. "But we don't ever really socialise together," he says. "We have our own lives."

And for Butler, the new Black Sabbath album is the culmination of their lives' work. "This is the perfect way to finish," he says. "It's an album that we're all proud of. As far as I'm concerned, that's it. That's my life done and completed."

After all that has happened in the past few years, did you ever believe that you'd finally get this album made?

Geezer Butler: Sometimes it felt like there was a curse on us. That's why we called the new album *13*. First, Bill had a heart attack. Then Tony got cancer. And before that Ronnie died. We've had to overcome a lot.

What went wrong when you tried to make an album in 2001?

We went to this place in Monmouth, where we always go. We had six or seven songs. But Ozzy wasn't really into it – he was doing his own solo stuff, so he was hardly ever there. So we didn't really have a direction. Rick Rubin got involved – he'd always wanted to produce Sabbath. But when we played the songs for him, we realised that they just weren't very good. So we left it.

"Rick Rubin said: 'Forget Metallica and all the metal stuff that's come since then. Be what you were...'"

Geezer Butler

After the last Black Sabbath tour with Ozzy in 2005, did you think that was the end?

I thought it might be. But I was always hoping that there would be a last Sabbath album.

What was different this time?

There was real commitment from Ozzy. Also, Rubin really brought out the best in him. Ozzy had gotten into the habit of singing above his range. Rubin got him to sound like the Ozzy of the first few Black Sabbath albums, rather than Ozzy of his solo albums.

How else did Rubin guide you?

He said: "Don't do a typical heavy metal album – and forget Metallica and all the metal stuff that's come since then." Right at the start, he got us all together in the studio and played us the first Sabbath album. He said: "This is what you were. It's not really metal, it's blues-based but with these evil riffs." He wanted us to keep it like that.

And is that how it turned out?

Well, it's definitely evil [laughs]. And there's one track that's out-and-out blues. It was a jam we did to warm up one day. We played it for 18 minutes and Rick recorded it. We've called it *Blues Jam* [laughs again]. The problem was, Rick kept playing it over and over. It drove me nuts. I couldn't stand it. But on the album it's been cut down to seven minutes.

Bill Ward is no longer in Black Sabbath. There have been various reports about what happened. So did he jump, or was he pushed?

Well, we're the ones that get the blame. But, to be honest, I don't think Bill would be able to get through a whole set now. Bill has had a couple of heart attacks. He's a strong guy, but you just don't know.

Born again: Sabbath in the studio. Producer Rick Rubin took the band back to their bluesy roots on new album *13*.

Has there been any contact with Bill since he left the band?
We asked him when we did Download [June 2012] if he'd come up and do a few songs, but he took it the wrong way – or his management did. He took it as an insult.

You recorded the new album with Brad Wilk on drums in place of Bill. Is it true that you also considered using former Cream drummer Ginger Baker?
It's a good job it wasn't Ginger Baker… after seeing that bloody documentary.

***Beware Of Mr. Baker*. It's aptly titled.**
He beats up the guy who's making the documentary! The bloke says: "I'm going to interview all the people that you've worked with." And Ginger Baker gets his walking stick and – whack! He says: "Don't you dare talk to anyone else. This is *my* film." And the bloke's covered in blood. What a pissing nutter!

As nutty as Ozzy?
It's a different madness.

You're the principal lyricist in Sabbath. How many lyrics has Ozzy written for the new album?
Out of 16 songs we recorded, Ozzy wrote four sets of lyrics. But a lot of the song titles are his, and I expanded on them. *God Is Dead?* was Ozzy's title. I wanted to call that song *American Jihad*. Ozzy was going: "Jihad? We'll get assassinated if we say that!" But that's what the song is about – a religious fanatic that sets out to prove that God isn't dead. He's read people – philosophers, communists – saying God is dead, and he wants to prove them wrong. To be honest, I thought *American Jihad* is less likely to get us assassinated than *God Is Dead?*. You offend everybody with *God Is Dead?*.

"We asked Bill [Ward] to come up and do a few songs at Download, but he took it as an insult."
Geezer Butler

Are any of your lyrics on the new album autobiographical?
There was one, but it's not on the album now. It was about problems in families. It's too personal to talk about.

But not too personal to be part of a Black Sabbath song?
Not if nobody knows it's about me. It's like *Paranoid* – that was about me, but nobody knew. Everybody thought that Ozzy wrote it.

So you really did finish with your woman cos she couldn't help you with your mind? It's a good reason.
It is, yeah. And it was at the time.

You mentioned *God Is Dead?*, but was death a subject you tried to avoid on this album, given what Tony is going through?
Yeah. But when Ozzy was writing lyrics, everything was about death and dying. So I had to change them around a bit.

How has Tony's illness affected you personally?
After the shock of what happened with Ronnie, that really brings home your mortality. You realise you haven't got that much time left on earth. But the way Tony kicked it aside and carried on with the album, it gave me a lot of inspiration. I'm not sure I could be like that if I had it.

After losing Ronnie, you must have feared the worst for Tony.
I did. When Ronnie started complaining about these aches in his stomach, we thought it was bad gas, maybe food poisoning. You never expected that in six months he'd be gone. So when Tony said he had cancer, I just thought that's the way it is with everyone. But luckily Tony caught it at stage one, whereas Ronnie was stage four, inoperable.

In such challenging circumstances, how do you all stay positive?
You have to stay positive for his sake, and for all our sakes. And you realise that it's not going to last forever, because that's life – you die at the end of it.

STUDIO: JOHN FENTON, SAM TAYLOR-WOOD

The lyricists: Ozzy and Geezer. "*Paranoid* was about me, but everyone thought Ozzy wrote it," says Geezer.

Black Sabbath 2013 with drummer Brad Wilk, engineer Mike Exeter and producer Rick Rubin.

STUDIO: JOHN FENTON

Ozzy is a self-confessed hypochondriac. Are you?
I'm the total opposite of a hypochondriac. I fear doctors, dentists, hospitals, everything.

Ronnie died, Tony has cancer, Bill has had heart attacks and Ozzy almost snuffed it in 2003 when he crashed his quad-bike. Have you had any brushes with death?
I did in the 70s. I was in a bad car crash in my Jensen Interceptor. I took some downers, went down the pub and had about eight pints, and on the way home I was overtaking this car that was going really slow. It was on a bend, I lost control of the car, and it literally took off in the air and landed on its roof. Luckily I wasn't wearing a seat belt, so when the car took off it threw me into the back. The roof cut the driver's seat completely in half. If I'd been wearing my seat belt I'd have been killed. Well, I was young at the time.

Have you ever had the feeling that somebody up there likes you?
I believe in fate. When we got back together with Ronnie, I hadn't spoken to him in 18 years, and then suddenly we were doing Heaven & Hell. It was fantastic. And it's the same now with Sabbath. It's almost like somebody else is guiding us. I've always wanted to finish with another Sabbath album, and now we've done it.

The last time Sabbath made an album with Ozzy, they named it *Never Say Die!* But the defiance in its title fooled no one. It was 1978 and Sabbath's career was in free-fall. They had been one of the biggest-selling rock acts of the 70s, but a combination of naivety and profligacy had left the four band members close to broke. The years of heavy touring, drinking and drug taking had rendered them physically and emotionally drained. On a creative level, they had little left in the tank, and on a personal level, relationships were at an all-time low. Ozzy had quit Sabbath in 1977 and the band had attempted to carry on with a different singer, Dave Walker, before Ozzy was persuaded to return.

But *Never Say Die!* bombed – peaking at No.12 in the UK and 69 in the US. And following a tour on which Sabbath were routinely blown off stage by their young and hungry opening act, Van Halen, something had to give. In 1979 Ozzy was fired. And it was Bill Ward, his closest friend in Black Sabbath, who had to tell him he was out.

It wasn't long before Ozzy had his revenge. By the mid-80s he was a major solo star, while Sabbath, with Tony Iommi the only remaining original member, were in decline. "We were at war," Ozzy says now. "It was one-upmanship, and you can't beat success."

But in the 18 years that followed his sacking, Ozzy never stopped singing *Paranoid*. And, deep down, he always felt that he had unfinished business with Black Sabbath. He reunited with Iommi, Butler and Ward for Live Aid in 1985, and again in 1992 for a show in Costa Mesa, California that was billed as Ozzy's farewell from live performance. And ever since 1997, when the band resumed touring on a semi-regular basis, Ozzy has wanted to make one more album with Black Sabbath.

"In my heart and soul, it was always my desire to round it off nicely," he says. "Everybody falls out, and everybody makes up. And I'm glad that we made up by doing a great album. I'm just happy that we've pulled it off at the end – even without Bill."

When you think back to 1979 and the day you were fired from Sabbath, are you still bitter?
Ozzy Osbourne: It was never: "Poor old me. How dare they fire me?" It was my own fucking fault. I was fucked up all the time, and I'd lost interest – it's true. I wasn't into the band any more. I was just moaning all the time and getting off my face on some fucking shit or other."

Does it feel surreal to be in Black Sabbath again?
There's one thing that's been hard for me to get my head around. Since my departure from the band, I've been the master of my own shit. So to go back, you have to stop that thought pattern and just be the singer in a band called Black Sabbath.

Who is the boss in Sabbath?
Tony has always been the leader. Because without his riffs we wouldn't have had a fucking chance in hell of doing anything. And he's still the boss. He comes up with the riffs and I have to work around that.

Who calls the shots when it comes to business?
I don't know. I'm not the manager of this fucking thing. My wife Sharon manages me. Tony and Geezer have their managers. And no manager ever agrees with the next, because they all want the best for their artist.

"Without Tony's riffs, we wouldn't have had a chance in hell of doing anything. He's still the boss."
Ozzy Osbourne

When Bill Ward resigned, many fans blamed Sharon, saying she tried to sell him short.
Here's the bottom line: being a drummer is the most physical part of any band. And when Bill turned up he looked like an old guy. I don't think he had the stamina to play for an hour or so on stage.

Ozzy working on lyrics: "Everything was about death and dying, so I had to change them around a bit," says Geezer Butler.

If I'd had a heart attack like Bill had, I'd go: "Fuck, I'm going to lose some weight." I train – I work my arse off. So you can't expect someone who's been sitting on their fucking arse, eating shit, to come along and go: "Equal split." It's insane. I honestly don't know what went down with that deal, but I suppose it's something along those lines. There wasn't any other reason. We didn't gang up on him. And it wasn't like, "Bill's just the drummer…" I didn't go: "Oh, if Bill's not here I get more money." I don't fucking need any more money, man.

Isn't Bill Ward as important to Black Sabbath as John Bonham was to Led Zeppelin or Keith Moon was to The Who?
I'd be a fucking liar if I said I'm glad Bill never made the album. It's kind of a Sabbath album to a point, but it would have been great if Bill could have worked on it. But if we'd had Bill, I honestly don't think we'd have been this far up the road. It was time to shit or get off the pot.

Meaning what?
Are we going to do this fucking album, or are we going to sit with our thumbs up our arses forever? It was time to stop fucking around and get on with it. I'm 65 this year, Tony's already 65, Geezer's coming up to 64. We all realised that if we keep hanging on any longer we're going to be fucking dead! I mean, fuck me, Tony could have croaked.

You've always said that Bill was your closest friend in Black Sabbath.
I love him. We were the Crazy Twins. Tony and Geezer would always travel on their own because they didn't want to be around us. We were always doing some fucking shit or other. Bill is a very dear friend of mine and he will always have a place in my heart.

So is the door still open for him?
If he gets his shit together. I'm not going to slag Bill off. But it's not our fault. For some reason, getting us all on the same page is the hardest thing in the world.

STUDIO: JOHN FENTON, SAM TAYLOR-WOOD

Can you talk to Bill right now?
Yeah, but it's a bit soon. I don't want to cause any shit. Let's just get this album out and get out on the road and see what happens.

It's taken a long time to get this album made.
This was not the first attempt. We've tried to do an album about five times, probably more. But the end result is mind-blowing. I'm my own worst critic, but this album is a work of art. When I got the finished master, my wife was in Europe. I called her and said: "Sharon, I can't believe what I just fucking heard.

"I was fortunate to have the kind of job that allows for the fact I'm a lunatic. I'm lucky I ain't dead."
Ozzy Osbourne

It's fucking incredible!" And she said: "That's the first time I've ever heard you say anything like that. And if you're saying it's good, it's got to be good!"

How did you relate to producer Rick Rubin?
Rick had a vision. And there were times when I thought: "He don't know what the fuck he's doing." Some days he had me in the studio for five hours doing one song. But if he'd told me to stand on one leg and do it, I'd have fucking done it, because I wanted to make a good record.

What was Rubin's vision for the album?
We started off as a jazz-blues band, and Rick was going for the bluesy angle of the first record. But I'd put this album between *Vol.4* and *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath*. Is has the vibe of that era. It's funny, this guy said to me: "I heard some tracks and it sounds like Black Sabbath." I said: "I'd have been pissed off if it sounded like Deep Purple!"

Tony was having chemotherapy during the making of the album.
He'd come in the studio some days after having chemo and he looked like he was going to pass out. He hadn't slept for two days, because the fucking chemo keeps you awake. He'd be ashen, weak. The treatment is worse than the fucking illness. Having chemotherapy is like having a headache and going to your doctor and he kicks you in the bollocks. You don't have a line of chemo and go for a night at the fucking Rainbow.

You've been here before, in 2002, when Sharon was battling colon cancer.
I thought she was going to die. I never knew anybody that had survived cancer. As far as I was concerned, patient plus cancer equals death. But my wife is a very strong woman. And Tony is a very strong guy. If it was me that had been diagnosed with cancer I'd have been dead by the end of the fucking day. But Tony would just come into the studio and play through it. I thought, "How the fuck does he do that?" I don't know. But he's my fucking hero.

Geezer says Tony's illness has given him a more powerful sense of his own mortality. Have you felt that too?
I'm 65 in December. My father died at 64. If I croak now, I croak. But I don't really get fucked up any more. I might have a drink from time to time, or I may do a joint, which is very rare now, but I don't go to bed with my heart jumping out of my chest because I've done too much fucking cocaine or heroin. I don't go to bed wondering if I'll wake up. In a way I was fortunate to have the kind of job that allows for the fact that I'm a lunatic. But more than anything, I'm lucky that I ain't dead. It's the luck of the draw. When Gary Moore died a couple of years ago, I was stunned. He was nowhere near as bad as I was, as far as I know. That really did shake my fucking tree.

Do you feel at peace in your life?
I'm never 100 per cent at peace, but on a scale of one to 10, I'm about an eight-and-a-half now. I don't see many people walking around with halos. I'm human, you know? I'm not from hell. I'm not from heaven. And I'm certainly not from Heaven & Hell! [laughs]. I'm Ozzy. I'm me.

The secret behind the success of the Sabbath reunion? "The big thing was that Ozzy was really into it," reckons Tony Iommi.

What do you do when you're alone?
You probably won't believe it, but I like being quiet.

Anyone who watched *The Osbournes* would find that hard to believe.
That was a period of my career that I'm fucking glad is gone. Sharon's turned into this television person now. And she's great. But she's always saying to me: "You are coming on to the show, aren't you?" And I'm going: "No! I fucking hate doing TV!" I didn't start off playing music to be the fucking weatherman.

Do you think *The Osbournes* damaged your credibility as a musician?
How do I know? I've never watched one fucking episode, ever. I hate to watch me on TV. Fucking hate it.

What is left for Ozzy Osbourne to do?
Nothing. I can honestly say that if I drop dead now, I would die a happy man. And if we never do another thing together, I can say that I was fortunate enough to mend the harm that I created.

After what Tony's been going through, it would certainly be ironic if it was you who dropped dead now.
Tony is fucking Iron Man! He'll probably outlive us all. And when he does die, they'll have to shoot him as well to make sure he's fucking dead! God bless him.

Sabbath's leader, Tony Iommi: "Tony *is* fucking Iron Man," says Ozzy. "He'll probably outlive us all."

"Sabbath is like a family. Whatever problems we've had over the years, it's never been personal."
Tony Iommi

SAM TAYLOR-WOOD

Tony Iommi has never been a quitter. Throughout Black Sabbath's long and eventful career, it is Iommi alone who never once gave up on the band. In the 44 years since Black Sabbath was formed, Iommi has remained the sole constant, leading the band through good times and bad. And he's still the driving force in Black Sabbath – even at a time when he's facing the biggest challenge of his life.

It has always been this way. "From the beginning," he says, "Ozzy and Geezer and Bill all looked to me to say, 'Let's do this,' or 'Let's play that.' And it stuck."

Now, as then, Sabbath's music begins with Iommi. "It all starts with a riff," he says. The band's new album was created mostly from music that Iommi had written and stockpiled over a number of years: dozens of riffs, and a handful of more fully structured songs. In addition, he wrote some new material from scratch during the recording of the album at Rick Rubin's studio, Shangri-La, in Malibu.

The result is an album befitting one of rock's most legendary bands. There are echoes of Black Sabbath's greatest music in the elemental power of *God Is Dead?* and *The End Of The Beginning*, in the epic scale of *Age Of Reason*, and in the melancholy beauty of *Zeitgeist*, an acoustic piece Iommi crafted in the image of *Planet Caravan* from the *Paranoid* album. And the strength of this new Sabbath music is all the more remarkable given the circumstances in which it was made.

"It's been tough," Iommi says. "But I've had so much support – from my wife, my friends and family, and from fans – and that's really what kept me going. With cancer, the worst thing you can do is sit around thinking about it all the time. So to work on this album – to play with the band and have a laugh with them – was all good medicine for me."

How did you discover you had cancer?
Tony Iommi: It was in 2011 when I first started feeling really tired. I was in New York promoting my book [his autobiography *Iron Man: My Journey Through Heaven And Hell With Black Sabbath*]. I was doing a lot of work, but I had to keep going for a wee every bloody five minutes. And then this lump appeared in my groin. So I saw a doctor out there. He said it could be an infection and gave me antibiotics. I was off to LA to start writing with the guys, so the doctor told me: "If the lump hasn't gone in two weeks, see another doctor in LA."

Were you worried?
I didn't think anything of it. But after a few days in LA I started getting a bit of pain in my groin. Ozzy kept saying: "You don't look too well. You ought to go to a doctor." So I did. And the doctor found I had a problem with my prostate, that it was too large. He said that he should operate to cut it down, and that he should take some of that lump off and check it. But I said: "No, I'll get that done back in England." So when I got home I had my prostate operation. And after the surgery, the specialist said: "Your prostate is fine now. But the lump – it's lymphoma." I didn't know what that was. He said: 'It's cancer." I was in shock.

Did you start treatment immediately?
There was nothing else I could do once I knew I'd got it. At first they said it was stage one lymphoma. But just before Christmas they called me to say they'd found it was stage three – there are only four stages. So that was a terrible moment for me.

You thought you were finished?
Oh God, yeah. I really did. After what happened with Ronnie, your friend has passed away, you think, "That's it for me, then." I'd started having chemotherapy, but I didn't think, "OK, I'm going to carry on with this and I'm not going to die." I just thought, "It's going to happen now". You can't think of any other outcome.

What is your prognosis now?
I have treatment every six weeks and we just have to see how it goes. When I'd had all of the chemo and radiotherapy, I asked the specialist: "Am I alright now?" He said: "No. This is an ongoing thing. You've got only a 30 per cent chance of the cancer going. But we can treat it." I just have to plod on, and if it all flares up then I have to have chemotherapy and radiation again.

Was the chemotherapy an ordeal?
It was very hard. It really does take it out of you. It makes you very tired and sick, and very depressed. You have these weird feelings. I've had my hands and my feet going numb. And the mental feeling drives you up the wall.

How did you manage to work on the new Sabbath album while going through that?
When we were writing, they guys came over to England and we worked at my studio in my home. Some days after treatment I couldn't work, but they understood. The worst thing was this tingling sensation in my fingers, like somebody's banged you on the funny bone. My fingers were numb. As a guitar player, that's not what you want [laughs].

But you got through it and completed the album.
We did. And we're very proud of it. The big thing was that Ozzy was really into it this time. When we've worked with him in the past, even on the tours, he's been in and out. Like: "I won't be in today." That's just the way he was. But with this album he's really put his mind to it and he's come up with some great stuff.

It took you a long time to get this album finished, but once you were in the studio with Rick Rubin, how long did the recording process take?
About eight weeks, I think. Not long. And some of the stuff happened really fast. Like when Rick emailed me and said: "We could do with another *Planet Caravan*." This was on a Friday night. So I wrote a song at the weekend, went into the studio on the Monday and played it to Ozzy, and on the Tuesday we recorded it. It's just an acoustic guitar, bass and Ozzy singing. It's called *Zeitgeist*. And it's turned out to be one of the best things on the album.

Is it true to say that this album would not have happened had Ronnie still been alive?
We were planning on doing another album with Ronnie. No doubt about it. And after Ronnie

Last men standing: "Bill [Ward] made the choice not to do it. He's so unpredictable. He'll just walk out," says Iommi.

passed away, I think that might have been the spark for Ozzy to contact us. Actually, it was the day after Ronnie's funeral that Sharon phoned and said Ozzy wants to talk. And that was the first time I'd spoken to him in a while.

Had you always hoped that you'd make one more album with Ozzy?
I never wrote it off. I always thought there was a chance of something happening again.

But this is Black Sabbath without Bill Ward. Had you recorded anything with Bill before he quit?
No we hadn't. But it was Bill who made the choice not to do it. He did the same when we got back together with Ronnie in Heaven & Hell. Bill was going to do it but he just pulled out. The funny thing is, he was going to apologise to Ronnie, because he hadn't seen Ronnie since he walked out of Sabbath in 1980. And, fuck me, he did exactly the same thing again! Bill is so unpredictable. He'll just walk out. And that's what he's done this time. We've tried three times now with Bill. You've got to give up at some point.

Although Bill is gone, do you feel close to Ozzy and Geezer after all that has happened in the last two years?
We're really close. They've been great. And really, all through the years, we've always remained friends.

That's not how Ozzy remembers it. He says that you were "at war" in the 80s.
Well, all that stuff that went on… yeah, it was hurtful. But we've never hated each other.

Do you still have regrets about firing Ozzy back in 1979?
That was difficult. And it wasn't just Ozzy who was having problems back then. I was doing loads of bloody coke and downers and God knows what else. None of us were in a great state. It was just a matter of time until it all fell to pieces.

How would you describe your relationship with Ozzy and Geezer now?
It's like a family. You have disagreements but you still see each other. We've always had that kind of relationship. Whatever problems we've had over the years, it's never been personal – it's always been about business. But after all that, we're still close.

Sabbath went out on the road in April for a tour of Australia and New Zealand, and there are UK dates in December. Is it a case of taking one step at a time?
We have to plan it carefully, because I don't know how I'm going to feel. When we did the shows at Download and Lollapalooza last year it really did help me. It felt great. But on a whole tour I can't stay up late, I have to make sure I get to bed at a sensible

> "We're in a good place. We get on so well. And unlike the old days, we're not on drugs all the time."
> *Tony Iommi*

hour. It's a bloody nuisance, really, but you have to do it otherwise you burn out. I just live my life differently now. If I go out for dinner with friends, I'm always the first to leave and get home to bed. If I lived the life I was leading before, it – the cancer – is likely to come back quicker than it might.

Do you now have a greater appreciation for everything you have in your life now?
You really do. You look at life so differently. And it comes down to basic things. You have to think differently about how your life can work now. It's not like it was before.

And the same is true of Black Sabbath?
Oh, it's so different for us now. We're in a really good place. We get on so well. And, unlike the old days, we're not on drugs all the time.

Or rather, you're on different kinds of drugs.
Ha ha, yeah. Tea bags and bloody chemo.

Tony Iommi's health is what will determine the future for Black Sabbath. Iommi remains cautiously optimistic. "Right now," he says. "I feel alright." He also looks better than might be expected, even if he has lost some weight and now wears a wig due to the hair loss caused by the treatment.

When he reflects on the events of the past two years – when he talks about what has kept him going through the darkest days of his life – Iommi says that the importance of making the new Sabbath album cannot be overstated. "It was such a big help," he concludes. "I needed something to focus on, and that's what this album gave me."

Black Sabbath will continue to tour as Iommi's treatment progresses and his condition is regularly assessed. But for Ozzy Osbourne, one thing is certain: if *13* is the last Sabbath album, they will have gone out on a high, and with no regrets.

"I don't know if we could make another album," Ozzy says. "We couldn't go through another two years like we've just had. But we don't need to. With this album, I can honestly say that we've gone full circle now."

Black Sabbath's 13 is available now via Vertigo.

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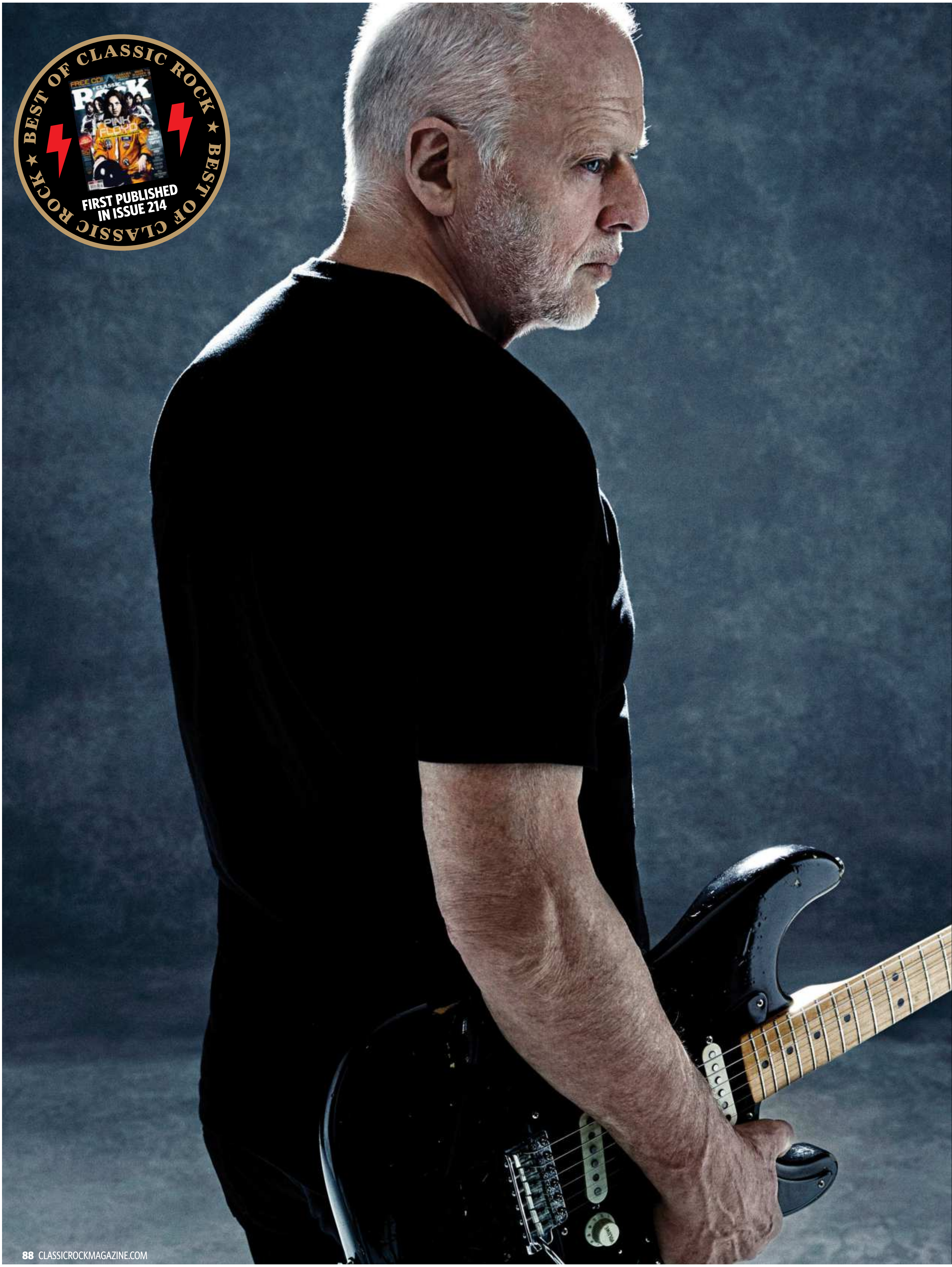
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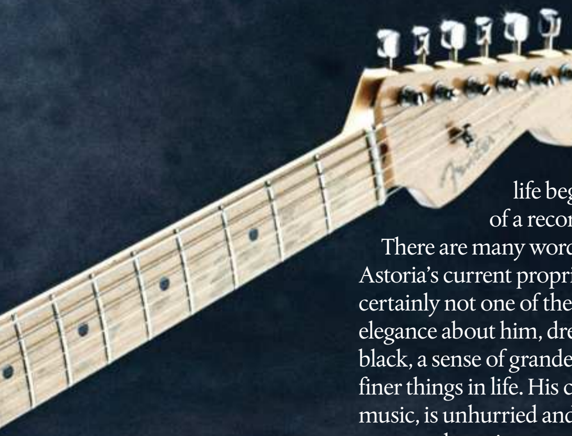
THOUGHT I'D SOMETHING MORE TO SAY

In 2014, **David Gilmour** returned with a brand new solo album, *Rattle That Lock*, and a fresh new perspective on Pink Floyd. Here, he looks back on a stellar 50-year career...

Words: **Mark Ellen**

Tucked away on the river bank in Hampton is an exotic houseboat called The Astoria. Charlie Chaplin spent a night on board in 1921, and remembered it as "rather an elaborate affair with mahogany panelling and state rooms for the guests. It was lit up with festoons of coloured lights."

In 1986 its upper-crust owner was approached by three stubbley individuals wearing T-shirts and was surprised – though delighted – when "one of these yobbos offered to buy it for cash". At which point the next stage of this sumptuous craft's life began with the installation of a recording studio.



There are many words you might attach to The Astoria's current proprietor, but 'yobbo' is most certainly not one of them. He has a poise and elegance about him, dressed from head to toe in black, a sense of grandeur, an appreciation of the finer things in life. His conversation, much like his music, is unhurried and thoughtful. At one moment he points out of the window – "Look at that, *that's* a smart bit of kit!" – as the gleaming, gold-painted Royal Barge glides past on its way to Hampton Court.

Last November came the release of Pink Floyd's much-anticipated *The Endless River*. A series of soundscapes edited from out-takes from their 1994 album *The Division Bell*, it was, we were told, the final outing from Floyd.

David Gilmour has since finished *Rattle That Lock*, his sublime and hugely varied fourth solo album, and ushers me into The Astoria's tiny front studio to discuss it – along with the legacy of what he now rather touchingly calls "our pop group".

I recognise this room. Isn't there a picture of you, Nick Mason and Rick Wright recording here in the booklet for *The Endless River*?
There is. We made pretty much the whole of *A Momentary Lapse Of Reason* and *The Division Bell* in this room. Which works, as you often stick an amp in another room anyway to get the separation from the drums.

The view of the river from the windows – in fact having windows at all – seems to fit with the ambient sound of your music.
Well I've never been keen on the traditional cellar that most studios are – no windows, no natural light, those days when you worked all hours and didn't want the dawn light creeping in and disturbing your reveries. But [adopts creaky voice] in our *old age* we now like to stick to office hours.

There are so many different types of music on your new album, *Rattle That Lock*: a lot of the Pink Floyd signature sound, but also a waltz, some funk and two jazz songs. Is it liberating to be able to have that kind of variety?
I don't know if it's liberating. I honestly don't know how it happens, actually. Whatever arrives, we just go with it. I don't have a plan. We work on it until it starts making sense, and then we cut a few things out and concentrate on what we've got going for us.

And you listen to things like *The Girl In The Yellow Dress*, that sort of jazzy one, and you think: "Does this fit?" And then you think: "Who gives a fuck? It's great. It'll fit!" I think I'm quite lucky that – like 'em or not – my voice and my guitar playing are distinctive. They're me and recognisably so, and that ties everything together.

How do you arrive at a song like *The Girl In The Yellow Dress*? Do you just wake up in the morning with a head full of forties jazz?
These things just arrive and I don't know where ▷

KEVIN WESTENBERG

Gilmour with his wife and lyricist Polly Samson.

Shine on: Gilmour as guitar hero.

or how. A couple of chords come and you start going down an alley – [beckons] "Come this way!" – and you follow them. Robert Wyatt plays the cornet on that one, recorded quite a few years ago.

The waltz track, *Faces Of Stone*, has echoes of Leonard Cohen, and it's about the passage of time into old age. Is it fact, or fiction?
That one is about my mother's last years and the nine-month crossover between my last child being born and my mother dying – they were on the planet together for nine months. She had a sort of dementia, and the waltz thing lends itself to a bit of madness, a clarinet waffling away, an accordion and a calliope [pump organ] to create a bit of atmosphere – that *boom-tang-tang boom-tang-tang* sound. I had a very difficult relationship with my mother, and it's just nice to… [trails off].

In what way difficult?
Well… it's difficult to explain. There's stuff in there about her getting a place at RADA [the Royal Academy Of Dramatic Art] when she was a teenager and her family not being able to afford to take it up. She was from Blackpool. Moving to London and going to RADA was her dream. So she was disappointed and unfulfilled and she… lived that fulfillment through me a bit, which created all manner of tensions. But [shrugs] life is complicated.

It's based on a particular day when we were walking in a park in London and she was having hallucinations and seeing things that weren't there, and I was thinking: "Hmmm, interesting," the beginnings of dementia. And later that day she did actually hold my new-born daughter in her arms. So you take a little idea like that and try and paint a picture.

A lot of lyrics for your music are written by your wife, Polly Samson. How does that work?
What happens is I play her a musical track – or rather, a number of tracks – and if she expresses an interest in one I'll put it on her iPod and she'll listen to it when she's walking. It has to be something she *likes*, she has to be inspired. There are two songs written by me on this album, and even those had some assistance from my talented wife. She tried very hard for years and years to see inside my mind, and look out from my eyes and write from that standpoint, and now she's realised that's not really necessary; if they come out of her but I sing them with enough conviction, they're still going to sound like they're connected to me.

The title track, *Rattle That Lock*, is built around the French travel-announcement jingle, like an echo of Kraftwerk's hymns to the joys of European trains. Where did the idea for that come from?
When you go to St Pancras station or airports, the jingles they play before announcements are usually really tacky and boring. But I heard this SNCF jingle in France, and it really bounces out. It's got a little melody, it's got a rhythm, it's got a little syncopation, and it makes you want to jig a little bit. So I recorded it on my iPhone – this was in Aix-en-Provence – and brought it home and started working on it.

The whole record has a shape to it – we tried to make it in the arc of a single day ending with the crackling camp-fire. The day starts at five a.m. – which is the title of the first track – and there's some birdsong and dog barking, and Canada geese, which I recorded at about five in the morning out of my window. And then it goes on through the things you do or the thoughts you might have. The kind of day when you could have gone to a nightclub and seen this jazz band, and you sit by a fire and cook some sausages while an owl hoots in the background before you crawl off, half-pissed, to your cot. It's not very literal or specific or linear, it's trying to make it have a flow.

> "I'm thrilled that each new generation seems to latch on to Floyd, and we get a fresh bunch of followers."

Was it hard writing the song about Rick Wright [*A Boat Lies Waiting*]? At some stage the two of you must have been very close.
Rick and I go back… I mean, I was twenty-one when I joined our pop group. We didn't spend our time being close, but we had a musical telepathy and, at its best, we knew *exactly* what the other was going to do and could bounce off each other. Rick had his moments of being rather down about

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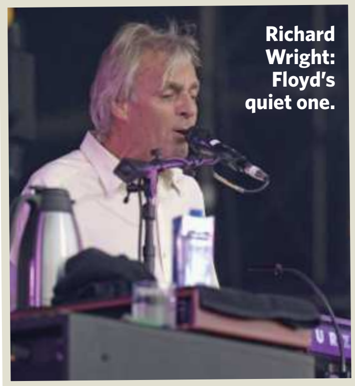
Starmen: Gilmour and Paul McCartney.

Learning to fly: Floyd in the 70s, on the way to being global superstars.


Richard Wright: Floyd's quiet one.

various things, and towards what was the end of his life – none of us knew that at the time – he came on board to do my *On An Island* tour and had the time of his life.

In what way?
We'd get to a certain moment in the set where I was introducing people, and Polly would shout [French accent] "Reee-shard! Reee-shard!" And then people in the audience who'd been there the night before noticed and started shouting it too, and it grew and grew every show, and he visibly puffed up with joy! I really think that helped boost his confidence and he started playing more effusively. We just felt he should be fêted a little, as he was so retiring and tended to be in the background, and I'm up the front there and I'm, you know, *big and strong*. So he had the time of his life and really loved it and was playing brilliantly. And I'd have loved to have had him around to help make *this* record [he died in 2008].

I interviewed Nick Mason and Roger Waters recently and asked about the likelihood of Floyd reunion. Nick said: "I love touring and I live in hope". Roger said it was "out of the question", as life at his age [71] "should be devoted to doing the things you want to do". Pink Floyd so far is three-act play. Will there ever be a fourth act?
No. I'm done with it. I've had a life in Pink Floyd for – what's twenty-one from sixty-nine? Quite a lot of years. I've had forty-eight years in Pink Floyd – quite a few of those years at the beginning, with Roger – and those years in what is now considered to be our heyday were ninety-five per cent musically fulfilling and joyous and full of fun and laughter. And I certainly don't want to let the other five per cent colour my view of what was a long and fantastic time together. But it *has* run its course, we *are* done, and it would be fakery to go back and do it again.

And to do it without Rick would just be wrong. I'm all for Roger doing whatever he wants to do and enjoying himself and getting the joy he must have had out of those *Wall* shows. I'm at peace with all of these things. But I *absolutely* don't want to go back. I don't want to go and play stadiums… under the [group] banner. I'm free to do exactly what I want to do and how I want to do it. I don't know if it's as good as Pink Floyd or worse than Pink Floyd or better than Pink Floyd. I don't give a shit. It's what I want to do and it's what I *will* do.

GROUP: ALAMY; WRIGHT: GETTY

> **"I don't need or want it any more. It's fine. No regrets. Nothing – almost nothing – but great memories."**

Give me an example of a Pink Floyd moment you re-run in your head over and over again because it was magnificent.
Oh, the great moments are legion. I have thousands of snapshot memories that are great. *Meddle* was a great moment for us. It showed the way forth and it was successful. But then so was *A Saucerful Of Secrets*. *Dark Side Of The Moon* obviously was *the* breakthrough moment and was terrific, and we suddenly moved up from the medium-time to the mega-time.

How about a moment when you curl up under the duvet, thinking about the horror of it all?
I don't have any that embarrassing, though if I watch *Live At Pompeii*, I cringe.

It's brilliant. And at least two of you don't have a shirt on!
Exactly! It's just… it's just personal. Mostly I can see how great it all is, and it's all sitting there in its memory box mostly happily. I'm very good at forgetting all the bad shit anyway.

When you watch those old bits of footage of the early Floyd do you recognise the person you were back then?
[Peers at an imaginary screen] I do see a chap there! In those days the music was exploratory and it was exciting to explore. But that, to me now, looks like a process – a process to find out what you do and don't like. And when you get older – necessarily, it seems to me – you find what you *do* like, and that maybe narrows your vision down a little bit. And in those early days, while it was exciting, there was an awful lot of it that was embarrassing and you go: "Oh, God, what are we going to do now?"

How do you mean?
Well we would have a template of what we were playing live. Someone would count in or start playing, and you'd know what the title was, and you'd have a rough template and then you'd just fly off on any tack you liked, and the music would build up and fly away and wander off in another direction, and some of those directions were dead-ends and some were exciting.

What do you remember of the brief period when you and Syd were in the group at the same time?
It was tragic, really. There were five gigs we did together and he would [sighs]… We've got a bit of film of Syd in a dressing room somewhere at one of those gigs, and he dances this little jig, a little dance, and he's all smiling and laughing. But you just look at him and go: "Oh God, no, tragic." Poor chap. I can't remember much about it. I was brand new and I think they knew I'd be taking it over.

Was there one song that you never got tired of playing?
For the very palpable joy that things like *Comfortably Numb* and *Wish You Were Here* give to an audience, I never tire of them as I know what they're doing. I suppose playing that same old thing again can be seen as being tedious, but really I'm always happy to do the ones people love.

I remember the big wooden aeroplane that ran down a wire over the audiences heads into the stage at Knebworth in 1975 during *Dark Side Of The Moon*. Does that funny old analogue world seem rather quaint now in the 21st century?
It *is* funny, it *is* quaint. And all those things you ▷

And then there were three: Pink Floyd's Rick Wright, David Gilmour and Nick Mason in 1994.

GETTY

could do so much better today, but would they be any more effective? I don't know. Today that could happen like magic but everyone would think: "Oh yeah? I saw that in *Star Wars III*". But back then it was really real and shocking and people went: "Fucking hell! An aeroplane flying over our heads!" Everything now has to get bigger and better and better is bigger and *not* better.

What are your memories of Live 8?
I thoroughly enjoyed it, though we had a few days of very tense rehearsals. We hadn't spoken to each other for years.

How did you decide what to play?
We made suggestions and Roger made suggestions, and I didn't care for Roger's suggestions. In the end I thought, actually, *we're* Pink Floyd and he's our guest, and he can just do what we tell him to do or fuck off.

What did he suggest?
He wanted to do *Money* – which we *all* did actually – and *Another Brick In The Wall* and *In The Flesh*.

And he was overruled.
Basically, yes.

I was just below the stage and it looked magical to me.
It *was*. It *was* magical. We were relaxed and we enjoyed it. We did a run-through of the set the night before to no audience in the park and that was terrific, and helped us feel relaxed and confident. It went very well.

But no temptation to carry on?
Been there, done that. Obviously I accept there are people who want to go and see and hear this legend that was Pink Floyd, but I'm afraid that's not my responsibility. To me it's just two words that tie together the work that four people did together. It's just a pop group. I don't need it. I don't need to go there. I'm not being coy or difficult, I just think that at my age I should do whatever I really want to do in life.

But I'm thrilled that each new generation that comes along seems to latch on to us, and we get a fresh bunch of followers and listeners as the years tick by. Though I don't quite know what's made it

"For Live 8 I thought, actually, we're Pink Floyd and Roger's our guest, and he can just do what we tell him to do or f**k off."

work for us that way when it doesn't for quite a lot of other people.

Roger once told me that musicians who achieve the level of success you achieved "must have holes in our psyche that only adulation can fill". Quite an honest thing to say.
It *is* an honest thing to say. And I think he's right, actually. But hopefully I don't have that hole in *my* psyche any longer, as I don't see the need for that sort of adulation on that scale. Also the strange thing about stadiums is you have no way of telling if it's going well. It's a crowd – in the singular. You can't really retain them as individuals. The power and energy of their 'love', so to speak, is a wonderful drug to boost your ego to the point where it's overinflated.

So why would someone like the Stones carry on if it can't be about money or critical standing? It must be about the validation of hearing 80,000 people go completely mental when you play an opening chord?
I don't know. If anyone else in any other pop group wants to go and do that, that's great. But I've forged a career that suits me pretty well. Some of these guys haven't quite got that career forged, so I guess they feel they want to carry on doing it in that way. I've had reasonable commercial success and reasonable artistic satisfaction. We'll see if this new one sells any. I suspect it'll do quite well.

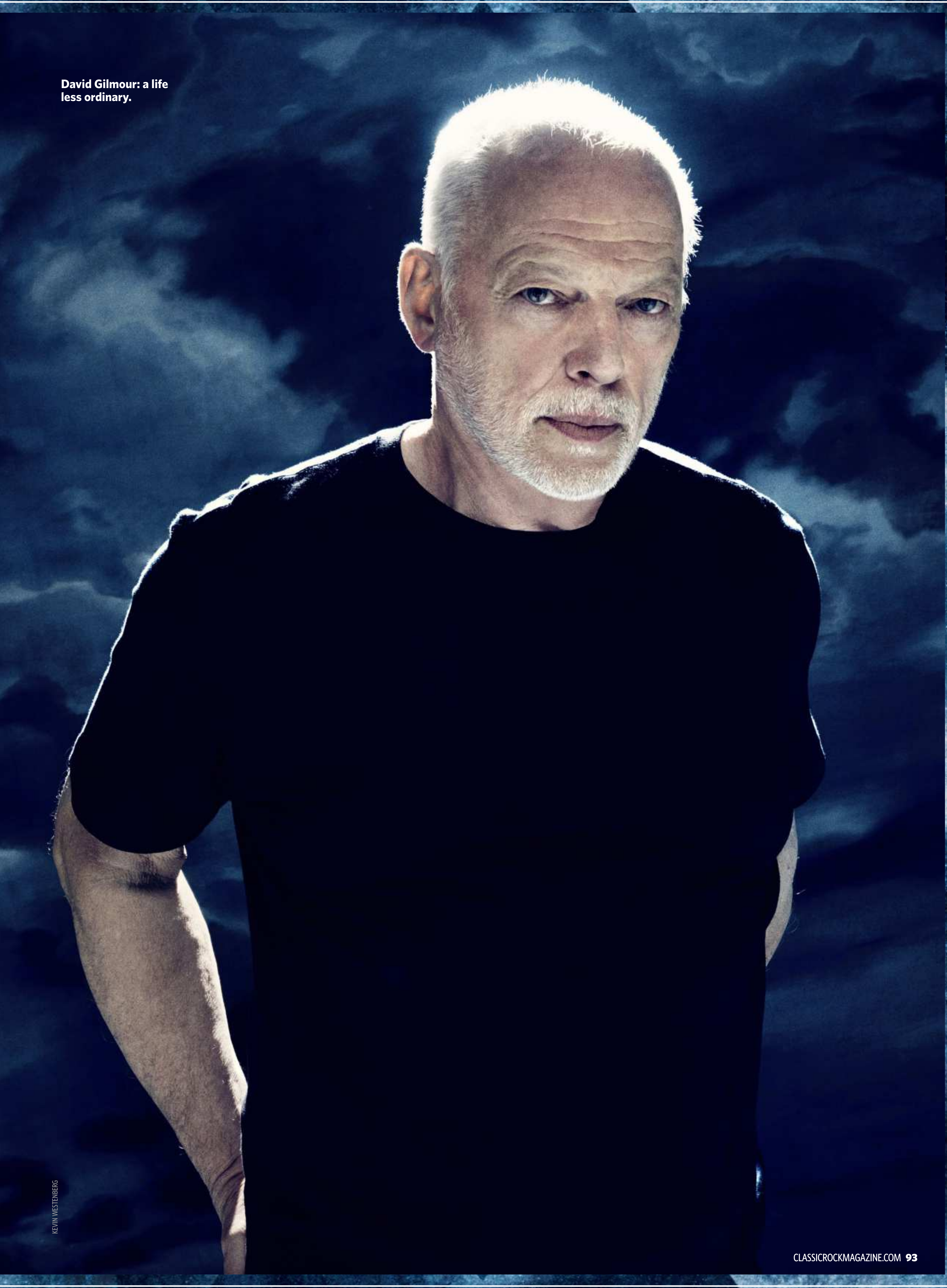
Was there one particular musician who changed the way you looked at music?
There were a number of moments that were pivotal. Bill Haley's *Rock Around The Clock* was a pivotal moment for me. And that was superseded in what seemed like months by *Jailhouse Rock* by Elvis, also pivotal. The Beatles were pivotal. Jimi Hendrix was a pivotal moment. Pete Seeger was a pivotal moment when I was young. I learnt guitar from him. Too many to name.

Who do you listen to now?
I always listen to a new Bob, Neil or Leonard record [Dylan, Young, Cohen], but I don't listen to much new music. When I have the radio on it all sounds dreadfully formularised to me, but I'm not its audience. When you get to sixty-nine you're not spending every day seeking out new pop music. Obviously there are whole layers of music away from what we get on the radio and telly. It's like that thing they say about rats: 'You're never more than six feet away from a rat in London'; you're probably never more than a hundred yards from someone doing a great gig somewhere, but I'm just not aware of it. If a new Pink Floyd came along now I wouldn't know it had happened.

So the plan now is to carry on making solo albums and occasionally tour them?
I haven't looked that far ahead. I haven't been out and done a tour for nine years. I'm doing five dates in Europe and then five nights in London in September/October, and I'll see how I like it. If I like it I'll do some more.

Have you missed it in the last nine years?
Not much.

Nick Mason misses it terribly.
He plays the drums, there's less responsibility. I've had a great career. I can do it when I want to and then lay off and do all the other things that make up a life. I've done the relentless… *everything-ing* – which is what you have to do to fight your way through and create a career of the sort we had. I don't need or want it any more. It's fine. No regrets. Nothing – *almost* nothing – but great memories. I've done it. And I'm happy with it. ●



David Gilmour: a life less ordinary.

KEVIN WESTENBERG

L.A. WOMAN
and the last days of
JIM MORRISON

Forget what you think you know. All-new interviews with Jim Morrison's bandmates and Parisian friends and associates shine new light on the making of the Doors' final album – and the mysterious death of their singer in July 1971.

Words: **Max Bell**

November 1970. Sunset Sound. 6650 Sunset Boulevard. Jim Morrison, Robby Krieger, Ray Manzarek, John Densmore, engineer Bruce Botnick and producer Paul A. Rothchild are staggering through rehearsals for the Doors' sixth studio recording. Even though they are back where the Doors made their first two albums, the mood is deadly. The band have busked through a meagre collection of material, including the germ of *L.A. Woman*, basic chords for *Riders On The Storm*, some blues jams, and a couple of discards, namely the demo for *Hyacinth House* and one track they've already finished. Tentatively called *Latin America*, it's been offered up for Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Zabriskie Point*. The director rejected the song after the Doors played it live for him.

"We played it so loud we blew his ears out," says Doors drummer John Densmore.

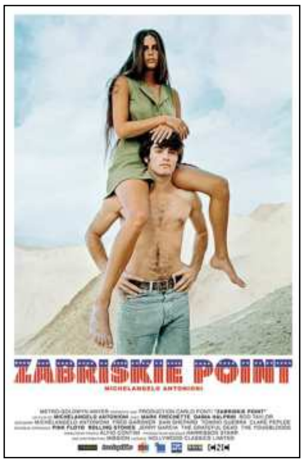
Equally unimpressed, Rothchild slumps over the console. "You know what? I can't do this anymore. This isn't working. This music is like cocktail jazz. It's awful. You produce it. I can't." Bombshell dropped, Rothchild sweeps up his belongings, including a bag of grass he calls his 'Killer Destroyer' stash, gives everyone a brief hug, and exits to stunned silence.

Ray Manzarek recalls the day. "We were giving Paul a preview and he was bored. We played the songs very badly – with Jim – but there was no chi, no energy. We didn't want to be back in Sunset and Paul couldn't bring us back to life. In that instant he was right. As soon as he left the room, that's when *L.A. Woman* started."

Rothchild's lethargy was understandable. The Elektra Records soundman had fallen out with label boss Jac Holzman and gone freelance. The Doors felt like old ground. He'd spent fractious time in 1970 producing *Morrison Hotel* and then sifted through hours of stage tapes for *Absolutely Live*. He'd also endured the trauma of producing Janis Joplin's *Pearl* album. Joplin died before its completion – aged 27, like Brian Jones. Carousing with Jim one night the singer had mumbled, "Brian, Janis, Jimi – you're drinkin' with number four". It was the last straw.

By 1970 the people prepared to buy Morrison's antics, and those who weren't, had divided into camps. Paul Rothchild was now in the latter group. "Morrison looked ugly," he said. "He was unhappy with his role as a national sex symbol, and after the Miami trial he did everything in his power to obliterate that. He gained enormous weight; he grew a beard. I quit because I'd grown tired of dragging the Doors from one album to another, especially an unwilling Jim, and he had virtually dried up. Two out of three times Jim would either not want to work or would go into the studio drunk. He would intentionally disrupt things… never fruitfully. Most of my energies were spent trying to coordinate Jim with the group."

Long-time Doors producer Paul Rothchild walked off *L.A. Woman*. The track *L'America* had already been rejected for the movie *Zabriskie Point*.



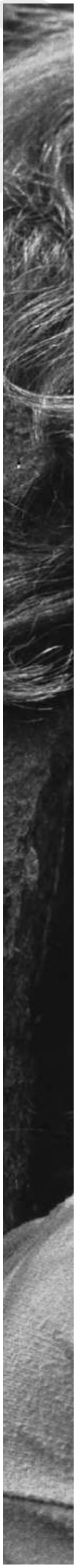
Doors manager Bill Siddons, who was virtually inured to Morrison's excesses with booze, cocaine, no-shows, hangers on and the endless liabilities of the band's live act before during and after Miami, remembered one afternoon "when Jim came into rehearsals and drank 36 beers".

Ever loyal to an old friend, even Manzarek agrees – the situation was dire. "Jim was an alcoholic. A genetic predisposition to alcoholism ran in his family. It was hard to tell him to clean up his act. One day around the *Morrison Hotel* sessions me, John and Robby sat him down at Robby's dad's house by the pool, and told him, 'This is seriously affecting us all now as a group, and you physically.' Jim says, 'I know. I drink too much and I'm trying to quit.' Which was a rare admission. We told him we'd help. Jim said, 'Thanks. Now let's go get some lunch at the Lucky-U. I want some funky Mexican food and a drink.' That was Morrison. The romantic poet who wrote '*I woke up this morning, got myself a beer*'. A real 'Fuck you!' line. Unfortunately that was the reality. Jim's attitude was always, 'Look out man, I'm hell bent on destruction'. We couldn't moralise. We figured he might emerge from the spiral, but working with Jim in the studio was the only way we knew how to transcend his problem."

After Rothchild's departure the Doors went to the Moo-Ling restaurant and considered their options. Sunset was out; likewise a return to Elektra's own studio. Krieger offered to produce but Morrison had a plan.

"Why don't we just do it in our rehearsal room, in the Doors office? We like it there. Bruce – you produce it with the guys. You know how I work," he smiled.

Once Holzman agreed to the idea, Botnick transformed the Doors Workshop at 8512 Santa Monica Boulevard on the corner of La Cienega into a makeshift studio. The squat two-storey building was near a variety of cheap motels, strip joints, liquor stores and burlesque bars – Morrison's kinda ➜



"WE SAT JIM DOWN AND TALKED TO HIM ABOUT IT. HE SAID, 'I KNOW, I DRINK TOO MUCH…'"

RAY MANZAREK

Jim Morrison and Pamela Courson, photographed by Edmund Teske in 1970 at the Bronson Caves, Hollywood, California. Courson moved to Paris during the making of *L.A. Woman*.

GETTY IMAGES

town. The room was a mess. Morrison's desk was covered in bottles of tequila and bourbon while an ashtray with a peeling tartan design overflowed with discarded joints and cigar butts.

Botnick hauled the old 8-track board the Doors used on *Strange Days* across the street from Elektra and set up his brand new console on the first floor with an intercom microphone over his head to communicate with the band, out of sight downstairs. "It was like home from home," Botnick says. " There was a pinball table and paintings on the wall. One was of a nude with a hole cut out of her head. I hung packing blankets and towels up for baffling and wired up the remote. It was primitive."

John Densmore didn't mind. "I used the same drum kit I had on the first record," he says. "It was like going back to the metaphorical garage in Venice where we started. I told Ray, I wanted to get the feeling Miles Davis had on *Live At Carnegie Hall*, where you could make a mistake, but you went for passion."

Speaking from his office in Sherman Oaks, Bill Siddons recalls the sessions: "I'd rented the Workshop and built the studio wall so they could rehearse. Bruce used my office as his studio. The board was on my desk. Mostly I worked there in the day and they came in at night. I didn't hang around. The record works because they focused on each other. They couldn't see the producer. It was different. Using the clubhouse was a masterstroke. They made the album from their heart."

Morrison was fairly straight during the early days of recording, at least by his extraordinary standards. Botnick: "He was punctual, professional, all those boring things." According to Botnick, "some sessions even began in the afternoon! The Doors were making the record Jim wanted, rather than what was expected. His notion of the Doors was as a blues band, and not a pop group".

Hanging off his stage mic, a gold Electrovoice-676-G, Morrison sang in front of a tile on which he'd written 'A clean slate is an empty slate'; a possible jibe at Rothchild. For certain songs he crouched in the doorway of the toilet, having ripped the door off for good measure. He was in the mood. As Densmore says, "If he kept his alcoholism out of the studio everything worked great. He was in trouble, yeah, he was, but without the world around him, everything else went away."

For the most part Morrison knuckled down. The bulk of recording was completed in six days. The other Doors knew the singer wasn't likely to endure the months *Morrison Hotel* had taken. During recording he gave an interview to the *Village Voice*, describing this rapid process. "This new album, it went really quick. Like a song a day, which is unusual. Like the first album. Amazing. Partly because we went back to the original instrumentation: just the four of us and a bass player."

With most of the basics finished, Morrison said he was ready for more down time. "I don't read or write much. I don't do much of anything. But I will get back in the saddle. I've just been kind of lazy. I go through cycles of non-productiveness, and then intense periods of creativity."

The interviewer mentioned Morrison's weight gain.

"Why is it so onerous to be fat? Fat is beautiful," the singer replied. "I feel great when I'm fat, I feel like a tank y'know? I feel like a large mammal, a big beast. When I move through the corridors or across the lawn, I just feel like I could knock anybody out of my way. It's terrible to be thin and wispy – you could get knocked over by a strong wind."

Fuelled on a succession of screwdrivers, Morrison outlined what it took to gain entrance to his circle: "You gotta get smashed and make a fool of yourself in a public place. You gotta get eighty-sixed [barred] from seven nightclubs. That's the Irish thing. I hang around mostly with the Irish – and the Italians." And then he challenged the reporter to a bout of arm wrestling.

He was less flippant with the *Los Angeles Free Press*. Explaining the new recording approach, Morrison let slip "we do a lot better when we're rehearsing. We leave a tape running. It's a lot cheaper and faster that way. Not that the other producer [Rothchild] was a bad influence… but we'll be ourselves for better or worse, co-producing with Botnick."

At the end of the interview Morrison gave his then definitive attitude towards narcotics. "There seem to be a lot of people shooting smack and speed now. Alcohol and heroin and downers – these are painkillers. Alcohol for me, because it's traditional. Also, I hate scoring. I hate the kind of sleazy sexual connotations of scoring from people, so I never do that. I like alcohol; you can go down to any corner store or bar and it's right across the table."

CAST OF CHARACTERS
LOS ANGELES

JIM MORRISON, RAY MANZAREK, ROBBY KRIEGER, JOHN DENSMORE
THE DOORS

BRUCE BOTNICK
CO-PRODUCED *L.A. WOMAN* WITH THE DOORS

PAUL A. ROTHCHILD
PREVIOUS DOORS PRODUCER

JAC HOLZMAN
ELEKTRA RECORDS BOSS

BILL SIDDONS
DOORS MANAGER

PAMELA SUSAN COURSON
MORRISON'S LONG-TERM PARTNER. DIED OF HEROIN O.D. IN DECEMBER 1974

GETTY

"IF JIM KEPT HIS ALCOHOLISM OUT OF THE STUDIO, EVERYTHING WORKED GREAT."
JOHN DENSMORE

By the end of November, five of *L.A. Woman*'s ten songs were near completion. The opening song *The Changeling* was plucked from one of Morrison's 1968 notebooks. A classic rocker à la *Roadhouse Blues, The Changeling* contained the mantra *'I had money, I had none'*, summing up Morrison's attitude to life. An obvious single, said the band. Robby arrived with *Love Her Madly*, one of his 'girl's-driving-me-nuts' numbers. At Jac Holzman's insistence, it became the album's lead-off single, released a week before Morrison departed for Paris on March 1971. Krieger pleaded for *Riders On The Storm* but was overruled.

The non-album B-side was a jokey blues romp written by Willie Dixon called *(You Need Meat) Don't Go No Further.* Sung by Manzarek, it epitomises the 'hurried out-take', with only an occasional grunt from Morrison. *Hyacinth House* was a Doors collaboration, whipped into shape by Manzarek, although Morrison and Krieger came up with the basic track while tripping at Robby's idyllic beachfront house in 1969, where they recorded a demo in the guitarist's home studio, marvelling at the hyacinths growing round Krieger's pool.

Latin America was renamed *L'America*. The original track was left intact, though Morrison overdubbed a guttural single word 'fuck' and Botnick phased Densmore's drum break. Lyrically it was a slight piece concerning a short holiday Jim took in Mexico with his drinking crew. It was all about sex with prostitutes, marijuana and tequila – hence *'I took a trip down to L'America, to trade some beads for a pint of Gold'*.

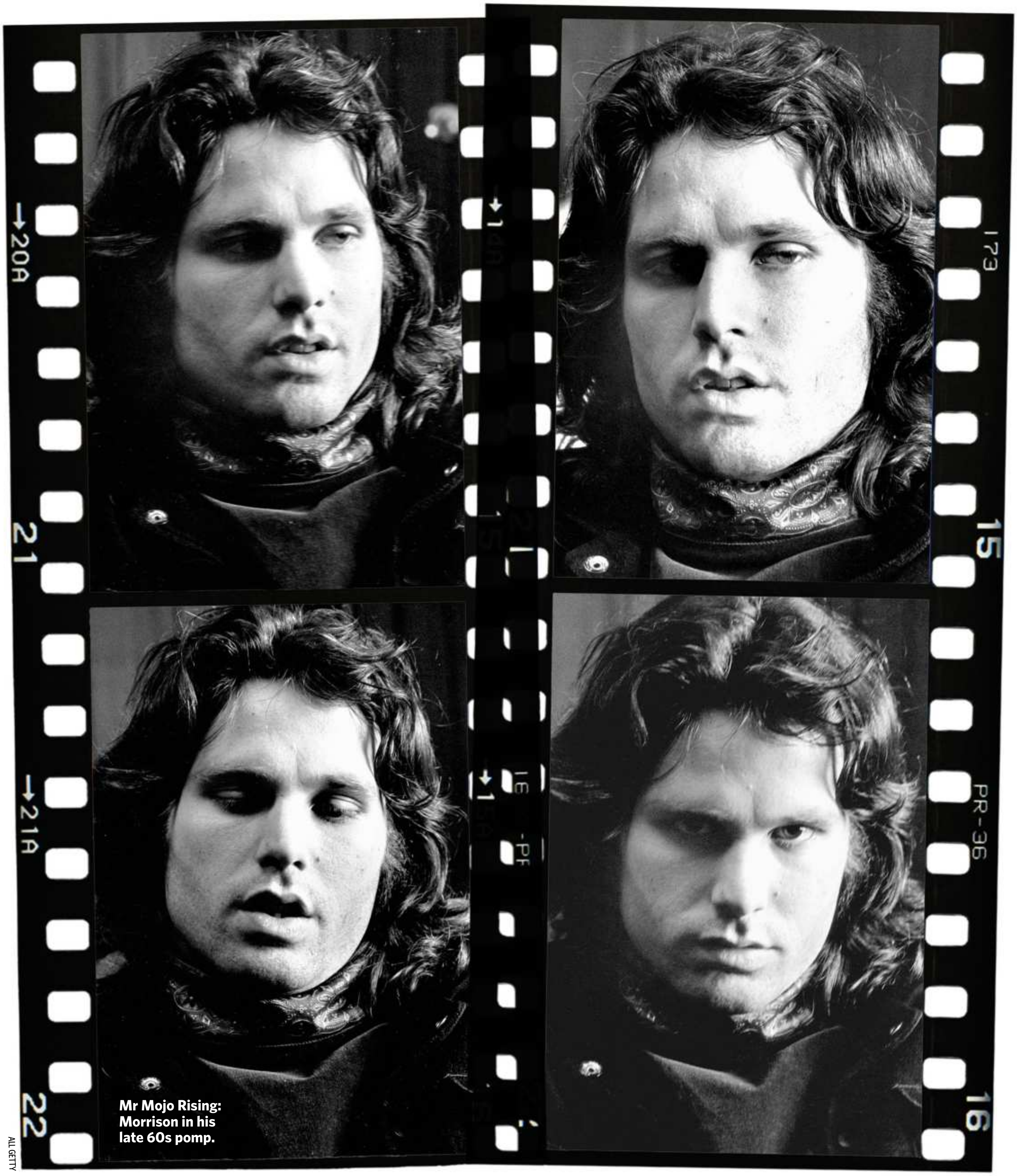
The song poem *The Wasp (Texas Radio And The Big Beat)* with its marching band rhythm and phased drum break was another adaptation from 1968 and had often been played live before recording took place. Usually, *Texas Radio* was used as the prelude to *Peace Frog*, from *Morrison Hotel*, or as part of a medley – a moment of hiatus between *When The Music's Over, Celebration Of The Lizard* and *The End*. Jim was as proud of the lyric as anything he'd written and included the poem inside the 1968 tour programme. According to Krieger, "*The WASP* was about the new music Jim heard when his family were moving around the South West States in the 1960s. He got this vision of a huge radio tower spewing out noise… This was when Wolfman Jack was on XERB, out of Rosarito Beach, in Mexico, blasting out 250,000 watts of soul power. He saturated the airwaves – you could hear him from Tijuana to Tallahassie up to Chicago where Ray lived. There were no laws about how powerful a radio station could be. That started rock'n'roll for my generation."

Morrison – the WASP, the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant in the song – had been a Wolfman fanatic. "My adolescence coincided with rock'n'roll although I never went to any concerts," he said. "In my head I heard a whole concert with a band and singing and a large audience. I was taking notes at a fantastic rock concert that only existed inside my head."

The Doors used a bass on every track, except *L'America*. Botnick hired the seasoned Jerry Scheff, who had just finished a stint with Elvis Presley at the International Hotel in Las Vegas. Morrison, a Presley fanatic, was delighted. So was drummer Densmore. "Jerry was incredible; an in-the-pocket man. He allowed me to communicate rhythmically with Morrison, and he slowed Ray down, when his right hand on the keyboards got too darn fast."

In December Botnick persuaded the Doors to hire young Texan Marc Benno as rhythm guitar foil to Krieger. Benno would play on four numbers. "Morrison was a nice guy who was on a roll," he said. "He reminded me of a wild gorilla at the sessions. He had a hand-held microphone and a telephone book full of songs. One day he stopped the session and took me to lunch. He ordered ox tails and drank Jack Daniel's out of the bottle. When we got back Jim had me show Robby a lick I was playing, and we used it on *L.A. Woman*.

"From there, it was a jam right through the album. We worked the tunes up on the spot, and did very few takes. We never saw anyone but each other, which kept distractions to a minimum, and kept Jim from feeling inhibited,



Mr Mojo Rising: Morrison in his late 60s pomp.

ALL GETTY

which I don't think was a problem for him, anyway! He cut loose completely while recording, and the result was a very spontaneous album."

In the second week of December the band held what they called "the blues day". After knocking off John Lee Hooker's *Crawling King Snake*, a regular in the repertoire in their 1967 club dates, Morrison delighted everyone with *Been Down So Long*, its title borrowed from Richard Farina's similarly named novel. He set it inside a prison. The prospect of spending six months banged up in Florida's Dade County Jail East Wing – a notorious 'hell-hole in paradise' – didn't fill him with delight. Yet, that was where he would end up if the aftermath of the Miami trial went wrong. When he sang *'Warden, warden, warden, won't you throw away your lock and key?/Come along here mister, let the poor be'*, he meant every word.

Then there was *Cars Hiss By My Window*, with Morrison's wah-wah guitar impersonation. Manzarek: "*Cars*… was brand new; a week old maybe. Jim said it was about living in Venice [Beach], in a hot room, with a hot girlfriend, and an open window, and a bad time. It could have been about Pamela Courson." Certainly, the lines *'Can't hear my baby, though I call and call'* seemed to reference Pam, who was now living in Paris, hopelessly embroiled in heroin.

On that blues roll, the song *L.A. Woman* completed the session. Lyrically, Morrison was inspired here by Los Angeles novelist John Rechy, whose 1963 novel *City Of Night* was a college favourite, and 1940s writer John Fante, who described Hollywood in love-hate lines like: 'So fuck you, Los Angeles, fuck your palm trees, and your high-assed women, and your fancy streets… Los Angeles, give me some of you! Los Angeles come to me the way I came to you, my feet over your streets, you pretty town I loved you so much, you sad flower in the sand…'

Manzarek says: "*L.A. Woman* was recorded in a state of high excitement. The Doors jumped in. We dug our teeth into that song. It was all about passion and hauling ass. It felt like we were on Route 101, on the road from Bakersfield to San Francisco. You can hear our enthusiasm. Welcome to Los Angeles!"

ALAMY

Riders on the storm: The Doors in the studio in 1970.

On December 8 Morrison celebrated his 27th birthday at the Village Recorders studio in West LA, taping poetry for a solo album. He was tired and hitting the bottle. After imbibing a lot of Old Bushmills he passed out and collapsed onto a stack of equipment. Everyone laughed: Hey, that's Jim for ya!

The next day Morrison demanded the Doors hit the road to play *L.A. Woman* live. Dates in Dallas and New Orleans were arranged for the 11th and 12th. Today rare bootlegs reveal that in Texas a doomy 15-minute version of the title track was unveiled alongside *The Changeling*, where Morrison sang in a falsetto scat he'd never used before. The Texas crowd also heard *The WASP* and *Love Her Madly* – Morrison changing the lyric to *'Do you love her madly?'*. Most surprising of all was a work in progress called *Riders On The Storm*, which Densmore describes now as "unlike anything we'd ever done".

The Texas show at the Dallas State Fair Music Hall was relatively triumphant. Morrison is drunk and sounds like he's going through a private hell, but he is coherent. Stoned immaculate. But if Mr. Mojo was barely risin' then, in Louisiana he didn't get up at all. The gig at the Warehouse, New Orleans, was a fiasco. It was the last live show the band ever gave. The music was over.

Manzarek recalls: "He just lost his energy completely. He was so dissipated. His voice got lower and lower and he ground to a halt. He was empty. This wasn't like when he comes to the studio wasted and can't deliver, but then there's always tomorrow – and by God he will deliver. This was final."

Drummer Densmore agrees. "His life-force was gone. He was so out of it. That was a depressing experience." Doors road manager Vince Treanor looked on from the wings. "He was very drunk. They finished with *Light My Fire* and Jim was hanging on the microphone trying to sing. He sat on the drum platform and didn't come back in for his vocal. Finally John kicked him and he got up and mumbled 'Yeah… yeah…' then he picked the mic up high and smashed the entire stand through the floor… Walked off stage and that was show over. John got up and said 'Right, that's it, I'm not playing anymore' and he walked off leaving Ray and Robby there."

With a tentative booking for four shows at Madison Square Garden in January cancelled, thanks to Jim's Louisiana meltdown, as a mark of contrition he returned to the studio the next week to finish *Riders On The Storm*. After looking at the lyric, Bruce Botnick played him the old Stan Jones pop song *Ghost Riders In The Sky*. Yet Morrison already had the key line, which he'd nicked from poet Hart Crane, who had written of 'Delicate riders of the storm' in his work *Praise For An Urn*.

No one knew then but *Riders On The Storm* was Jim Morrison penning his own epitaph. According to Manzarek: "He adapted the song from his script for the movie *HWY*. It was about a hitchhiker, a killer who hijacks a blue Mustang in Joshua Tree desert. Jim was obsessed with *HWY*, which he made with a bunch of his UCLA cronies." Footage from the project is used in the new Doors documentary, *When You're Strange*. "Never finished it. Great photography though from Paul Ferrara," says Manzarek. "After 10 minutes of coherent shooting the four of them got totally wasted on Cannabinol, a heavy pill version of marijuana. Paul told me they lost it afterwards and tripped back to Los Angeles. Anyhow, it gave Morrison the lyric for the last song he ever sang on planet Earth with the Doors. An insane killer, a lunatic, he's going to do something bad. Give him a ride, why don't you? But when the end comes you realise Jim's singing a beautiful, romantic song: *'Girl you gotta love your man/Take him by the hand/Make him understand/The world on you depends/Our life will never end…'* He was singing that for Pam."

In January, during the hottest temperatures ever recorded in that month in California, the Doors and Botnick moved into Poppi Studios, Motown's West Coast complex, to mix the album. Morrison added a harmony vocal to *Hyacinth House* and, having suggested to Botnick that they use a thunderstorm sound effect as an opener for *Riders On The Storm*, he climaxed the final number with an eerie vocal whisper that was his last recorded contribution to the band.

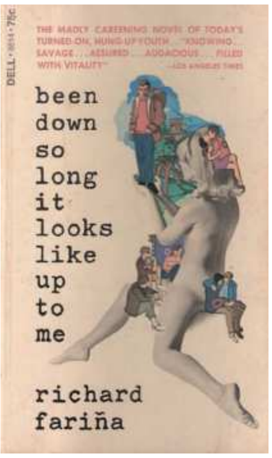
Elektra boss Jac Holzman turned up during the final mixing. On hearing the album he broke down in tears. His most beloved charges had delivered after all. Now they were out of contract. Elektra's gold standard group, the biggest band in America, owed him no more.

With *L.A. Woman* finished and the title agreed, the Doors convened for the cover photo shoot. Morrison sat down on a stool, hunched, an unseen bottle of

Irish whiskey at his feet. Manzarek: "In that photo you can see the impending demise of Jim Morrison. He was sitting down because he was drunk. A psychic would have known that guy is on the way out. There was a great weight on him. He wasn't the youthful poet I met on the beach at Venice."

The album's art designers, Wendell Hamick and Carl Cossick, were outside the Elektra family that oversaw previous Doors products. They came up with an idea for a rounded corner cover and a cellophane window. Behind that was a yellow inner sleeve showing a woman crucified on an electricity pole. The album was released in April 1971. It hit the Top 10 a few weeks later.

During the making of *L.A. Woman*, Morrison's partner Pamela Courson went to Paris and stayed with Count Jean de Breteuil, a wealthy socialite with a penchant for blondes, violence against women and horrendous heroin abuse. Breteuil met Courson in Morocco when she was buying clothes for her boutique, Themis, on North La Cienega. Jim paid for Themis with his *Strange Days* royalty cheque. He wanted to call it 'Fucking Great'. Though he posed, awkwardly, wearing Pam's flamboyant garb, Morrison detested the people who hung out with his girl. In the song *Love Street* he sang '*She has robes and she has monkeys, lazy, diamond-studded flunkeys*.' The original rhyme was 'junkies'.



The book that gave Morrison the song title of one of *L.A. Woman*'s bluesiest tracks.

Pam, a junkie herself, returned to Jim for a tempestuous Christmas then went back to Paris to renew her relationship with the Count on February 14. Morrison was now talking about moving to France himself. He'd tired of being a rock star and wanted to escape. His attorney, Max Fink, warned Morrison that if Miami turned nasty he'd have his passport confiscated. A tactical exit from the USA was a good idea.

"I SAW THIS LARGE GUY, LIKE ORSON WELLES' SON. I THOUGHT, 'HOLY FUCK! THIS IS JIM?'"
PAUL ROTHCHILD

While Courson was strung out on the Left Bank, Morrison started taking more cocaine. He chain smoked Marlboros and Gauloises, and became more addicted to hard liquor. He hung out with fellow Southerner Steve Stills at the Crosby, Stills & Nash house on Shady Oaks. He and Stills shared a Florida military brat background. Jim's father had served in the US Navy aboard a warship in the Gulf of Tonkin. Stills' old man wasn't far away.

Jac Holzman saw Jim for the last time at an Elektra Records party to show off a new studio complex on March 3. "He was unusually quiet. I could feel finality hanging in the air." The party retired to the Blue Boar restaurant. "Jim was half there, half somewhere else," Holzman recalled. "As we left, we said our goodbyes to him. We'd enjoyed a lifetime together in the concentrated blazing arc of rock'n'roll. Jim and I hugged each other, and then he turned somewhat awkwardly and walked away."

A few days later Paul Rothchild was at Elektra on business. "I heard the door open and felt this large man entering. I didn't recognise him. Then I was tapped on the shoulder, and I turned around and this large person who looked like Orson Welles' younger son, said 'Hi, Paul'. I said to myself 'Holy fuck! This is Jim?'"

On the eve of his flight to Paris, Jim drove to the airport with friends. He got so smashed he missed the plane, and travelled out the following day, flying TWA Ambassador Class. Reunited with Courson they moved into the fabulous Hotel George V, which he said "looks like a red-plush whorehouse". The couple then moved to L'Hotel, Rue des Beaux-Arts, a funkier establishment favoured by Mick Jagger.

Courson found them a lavishly furnished third floor, three-bedroom apartment in the Marais district, 17 Rue Beautreillis, owned by a French model and starlet Elizabeth Lariviere. That week Morrison picked up a copy of *Newsweek*, which ran a cover story – 'War Against The White Death' – about the flood of heroin in Europe and America, much of it arriving via Paris and Marseille. By coincidence, director William Friedkin was finishing his smack movie *The French Connection*, days before Morrison's arrival. It was no secret: Paris was awash with heroin, nowhere more so than in the rock clubs.

A 21-year-old war photographer called Patrick Chauvel was working as a part-time barman at one such venue – the Rock'n'Roll Circus, on the Left Bank. "I saw Jim Morrison many times at the club. He was rarely on his own," he says today from his home in Paris. "He'd come in and sit on a couch, separate to the other clientele. He didn't dance or make a big noise. I remember him coming in once three nights in a row. He came often and there were times when I didn't see him but it was a big club on two floors, full of French stars – he wasn't the only big star in the club. He was interested in my friend Sky, a half-breed American Apache. They had things in common: [they both spoke English], Sky's dad was Scottish, the Vietnam War – Sky was a deserter – and the Indians. Sky said Jim was writing a poem about him, about the fact Sky's father died in a car crash leaving the family to go back to the reservation in Tucson, Arizona. Jim wanted to replace Sky in Vietnam so he could get an honorable discharge. He was fascinated by the Indian's story."

Chauvel doesn't believe Morrison was in the club to buy drugs. "He didn't need to buy in there. I never saw him take drugs but he was always alcoholised, heavy on his words, a bit emotional. He'd be silent then he'd get up and say something really loud. You could see in his eyes, he had something important he wanted to say with a lot of energy, but it wouldn't get past his mouth. It went through his eyes for a moment. That was it. He was fed up. He was not in a good place."

Chauvel recalls seeing Morrison at the Circus with a blonde girl, not red-headed Pamela. "There were other girls at his table who'd gather round him but he came in with this blonde often. They took photos, always Jim on the couch, in the same space." (The nightclub manager, Sam Bernett, thinks the blonde may have been French-Canadian – which would make Robin Wertle, Jim and Pam's 19-year old assistant, a good bet.)

As for the narcotics scene, Chauvel equates it with the times. "A lot of drugs, yes, a very free time for sex, a lot of jealousy and tension. The nightclub scene was heavy – gangsters and very bad cops. There were a lot of fistfights inside, which wound up on the stairs and in the street. There was a gunfight outside the club. I used to carry a bayonet for protection. Crazy but necessary. There was a triangle of these places – the Circus/Alcazar, La Bulle and Le Sherwood – big places in the same area. All heavy."

Morrison lived a dual life: poet by day, obliterated by night. Moving to Paris hadn't liberated him. For two weeks Pam and Jim shared the apartment before Lariviere split for St. Tropez with boyfriend Philip Dalecky, a drinking buddy of Jim's. Morrison's health was poor. He was suffering lingering pneumonia. He became asthmatic. He was prone to violent hiccups. To escape the Parisian damp, the two young Americans decided to catch some sunshine. In April they traveled to Toulouse, visiting Andorra, Madrid, Granada and Morocco, where Jim had enjoyed the July climate a year earlier with Doors publicist Leon Barnard.

On their return, May 3, Morrison seemed happy. He'd lost weight and regained strength. He and Pam enjoyed being tourists, shooting Super-8 home movies. That mood didn't last long. Jim was often alone in the apartment now since Pam and the Count were, allegedly, seeing a lot of each other. True to form, Jim looked for new buddies. He still frequented the Rock'n'Roll Circus and L'Alcazar, semi-exclusive dives by the Seine, patronised by the Stones, Hendrix, Led Zeppelin and whichever rocker was in town. Largely unnoticed, Morrison would prop up the bar – a bottle of vodka in tow. Club manager Sam Bernett claimed, "Every time Morrison came in he was high, or drunk; in an abnormal state".

Here on May 7 a young Frenchman called Gilles Yepremian came across Morrison being evicted from the Circus by the bouncers, after he sunk too much whiskey and rearranged the furniture. "He was totally drunk. Nobody recognised him," says Gilles. "I got a taxi and we drove down the Seine. At the lights Jim saw some policemen and he rolled down the window and shouted, 'Fuck the pigs!' so the driver kicked us out. I got another taxi and Jim was so pleased he tried to tip the man hundreds of francs. He was laughing uncontrollably. I didn't know where he lived so I took him to the apartment of my friend Hervé Muller."

Muller and his girlfriend Yvonne Fuka opened the door to find Morrison lurching in his face. "Hervé! Meet Jim Morrison. He'll have to stay with you." Morrison fell on Muller's bed. They left him, passed out.

The following afternoon Morrison took his new pals to the bar Alexander where he downed Bloody Marys and an entire bottle of Chivas Regal. He insulted nearby diners and became increasingly abusive. Gilles: "When he

was sober he just looked like an American student on holiday. Very quiet and shy. Once he became drunk he was a madman."

In May, Morrison and Pamela had dinner chez Muller. "Play a record if you want," young Hervé told Morrison. Jim settled on Buffy Sainte-Marie. Later he and Pam were so taken with the Corsican wine Fuka served they said, "Let's go there!" They travelled to Marseilles again, where Morrison lost his passport and wallet. They waited two days for a replacement passport then flew to Ajaccio. On return they stayed at L'Hotel briefly before moving back to the apartment. Pam hired them 19-year old French-Canadian Robin Wertle. "Neither Jim nor Pamela spoke French," said Wertle. "My job included everything from getting a cleaning lady, typing letters, calling America, buying furniture, a typewriter for Jim, and making arrangements for him to show his films."

He never did.

Back in Paris, Morrison described his adventures to old friends Frank and Kathy Lisciandro, and suggested they visit: "There's a room for you here." He sent his attorney Max Fink a postcard of Moroccan scenes. "Dear Max, it's a beautiful spring in the 'City of Love'. Just got back from Spain, Morocco & Corsica – Napoleon's birthplace. Take a vacation! The women are great & the food is gorgeous. Love, Jim x."

In late May, Morrison called John Densmore, expressing delight at his copy of *L.A. Woman*. "He'd just got the finished album," recalls Densmore. "Jim told me what a great place Paris was, and he said he was definitely coming back to LA. He didn't know when. He said good things about the band… He sounded happier than when he left."

Morrison resumed an acquaintanceship with Jacques Demy and his wife Agnes Varda, leading lights in the cinematic French New Wave. "We had a common friend in Alain Ronay," says Varda, who has seldom spoken in depth about Jim until now. "We saw the Doors in Los Angeles in 1967 when Jacques was filming *The Model Shop*," recalls Varda from her Parisian home. "In 1970 he'd visited the set for my film *Lions Love* – he appears briefly." Alain Ronay was someone knew was a student at the UCLA Film School in 1964; the older man was a post-graduate. Jim also turned up on set with Ronay for Demy's film *Peau D'Ane* (Donkey Skin).

During that initial visit to Paris, Morrison went to a birthday party for Varda's 10-year-old daughter Rosalie. "I think he liked us because we never asked him for anything," says Agnes. "He was drunk that afternoon; drunk but happy. He drank a lot of brandy. Other times I saw him in my courtyard.

"He used to visit us and eat. He sat in my yard for many hours. Didn't talk much. Didn't like to gossip. I never even took his photograph. His wish in Paris was to write poems.

"I wasn't like a private friend where he'd come and have dinner on his own. It was always in company. He sat in my kitchen in what's supposed to be his time of craziness – he was OK. I didn't bother him, and I wasn't constantly bothered about him."

In June, Jim and Pam flew to London, staying at the Hyde Park Hotel, which they hated. Pam resumed her liaison with the Count, who had the keys to Keith Richards' and Anita Pallenberg's house in Cheyne Walk, where the smack flowed while Keith was away in Nellcôte, South of France, starting the sessions for *Exile On Main St.* The Count was now juggling between Pamela, Jean Paul Getty Junior's wife Talitha, and Marianne Faithfull. In her autobiography, Faithfull describes de Breteuil as "a horrible guy, someone who had crawled out from under a stone. Somehow I ended up with him… It was all about drugs and sex".

In London, Morrison met up with McClure. He recalled a riotous evening "in the Soho clubs. The Bobbies busted us for being drunk and disorderly. Finally we decided to take a taxi to the Lake District, and got busted again. I guess taking a taxi all that way isn't done ordinarily".

Morrison invited Alain Ronay to London. "I moved them to the Cadogan Hotel, near Sloane Square," says Ronay, who now lives in Los Angeles. "It was a happy time. No paparazzi. I never saw Jim sign one autograph. We went to the theatre, did all the usual things. I returned with them to Paris and moved into the apartment. Pam had her own life entirely. She wasn't always around, but for the whole of June I lived with Morrison, practically 24 hours a day. I won't deny he was a dark and complicated person, or that Pam was a basket case. But strike the fact that Jim was despondent, or drug addicted, or terminally depressed. He was living his dream, and that had nothing to do with rock. He was delighted at the success of *L.A. Woman*, but his pleasure lay elsewhere."

> "HE WAS LIKE A SHY STUDENT ON HOLIDAY. BUT ONCE DRUNK HE WAS A MADMAN."
> ***GILLES YEPREMIAN***

Even so Morrison must have been getting studio withdrawal symptoms since on June 15 he hooked up with two American street musicians who met he after sinking whiskey at the Café de Flore. Jim persuaded the buskers, who were crucifying Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young's *Marrakesh Express*, to join him at a local jingle studio where they recorded a few drunken rambles including Morrison's poetic ode to Pamela, *Orange County Suite*. The engineer gave Jim the tape box on which he scribbled a band name, Jomo and the Smoothies. *The Lost Paris Tapes*, as they became known, ended up in a white plastic bag from La Samaritaine department store which Morrison left at Phil Dalecky's apartment but never retrieved.

One mid-June day, with Paris sweltering in a heat wave, Morrison collected kindling wood from the courtyard at Beautreillis for the fireplace. Carrying it upstairs with Ronay, he was soon out of breath. "What's up with you?" Ronay recalls saying, "I'm 10 years older than you, and I'm not having a problem".

Morrison laughed the incident off, but was sweating heavily. He had started coughing up blood again so, at Pam's insistence, he revisited an American doctor. He renewed a prescription for the treatment of pneumonia and respiratory problems.

In the final weeks of his life, Jim and Pam's relationship reached breaking point. Faux suicidal, Pam often spent nights with the Count while sharing her saner moments bullying Morrison over his lack of writing activity. Morrison wasn't ready to admit defeat. He wrote to Elektra's business director Bob Greene on June 28. "Paris is beautiful in the sun, an exciting town, built for human beings. Speaking to Bill [Siddons] a while back I told him of our desire to stay here indefinitely." Pamela had plans to buy an old property, maybe a disused church, where Jim could stop being a rock star and become a poet. Morrison asked Greene "for a sort of financial statement in general? Also a copy of the partnership agreement, if it was ever completed."

Funds running out, he told Greene to turn over Themis to the trust of Pam's sister and her husband – "we'd like to be completely clear of any involvement" – to organise new credit cards – "we could use them made out in both our names" – and to send a cheque for $3000. "House bills are catching up." Touchingly he also asked Greene to make sure his dog Sage was well looked after. "Send Judy [Pam's sister] 100 bucks for the dog." It didn't sound like Jim had any plans to return to California at all.

Jim loved going to the bookshops like Shakespeare And Company near Notre Dame. He was fascinated by the atmosphere of unrest in a Paris still recovering from the riots of 1968. He wrote brief verses, often sitting on a bench in the tranquil Place des Vosges – his favourite haunt. In *The Sidewalkers Moved*, composed a few days before his death, he wrote 'Join us at the demonstration'.

Jim, Pam and Ronay spent June 28 in Chantilly; they had lunch at Hotel de l'Oise, where Ronay took the last known pictures of the singer. In one he's hugging Pam. In another he gives Ronay his best lop-sided grin. "An idyllic day," says Ronay. Back in Paris that night Pam got hold of more heroin. She later told friends that Jim started experimenting with the drug to keep her company, "snorting lines off his credit card".

On July I Morrison was spotted by an American fan dining alone, drinking white wine and munching a croque monsieur in the bar Le Mazet after he and Pam had a blazing row in a neighbourhood restaurant near Beautreillis, witnessed by two German students who shared their table.

Herve Muller hadn't seen Jim since they went to a performance of Robert Wilson's en vogue play, *Le Regard Du*

CAST OF CHARACTERS
PARIS

ALAIN RONAY
CLOSE FRIEND OF JIM'S WHO SPENT SEVERAL WEEKS LIVING WITH MORRISON IN PARIS

AGNES VARDA
BELGIAN-BORN FILM DIRECTOR OF THE *RIVE GAUCHE* SCHOOL, ALSO A FRIEND OF RONAY AND JIM

HERVE MULLER AND GILLES YEPREMIAN
JIM'S FRENCH FRIENDS

COUNT JEAN DE BRETEUIL
INTERNATIONAL PLAYBOY AND DEALER AND SOMETIME LOVER OF COURSON AND ALSO OF...

MARIANNE FAITHFULL
LONDON-BORN SINGER AND STONES-RELATED LEGEND

SAM BERNETT
MANAGER OF THE ROCK'N'ROLL CIRCUS IN PARIS WHO DISCOVERED MORRISON DEAD IN THE REST ROOMS OF THE CLUB

PATRICK CHAUVEL
BARMAN AT THE CIRCUS. NOW A FAMOUS WAR PHOTOGRAPHER

ROBIN WERTLE
THE 'SECRETAIRE' TO JIM AND PAM

GETTY

17 Rue Beautreillis, Jim's last home.

JOHN WOOLFORD

Sourd (Deaf Man's Glance), at Theatre de la Musique on June 11. Muller recalls that Ronay turned up during the interval and they left the theatre with Morrison. They retired to a cocktail bar called Rosebud, where Morrison was hassled by fans, moved on to La Coupole then to Pam's druggy haunts in Saint Germain accompanied by two flamboyant gentlemen – "minets bizarres" – before Morrison and Pam spent the small hours drinking at Café de Flore, Les Deux Magots, and Brasserie Lipp, with various debauched socialites.

Muller never saw Morrison again. He did phone the singer's apartment around midday on July 3, however. "A rather strange sounding Ronay answered the phone," Herve recalled in his book *Jim Morrison Au-Dela des Doors*. "He said Jim and Pam have gone away for the weekend. And yet Jim Morrison had already been dead, apparently, for four or five hours, in a hot bath."

Ronay thinks Muller may have called a day earlier. Morrison said he didn't want visitors. "So many people have exploited their liaisons; like that awful journalist [Tere Tereba] who bumped into Jim once at La Coupole restaurant, and suddenly she's writing detailed dialogue about their supper ["chocolate mousse for the ladies, please"] – it's nonsense."

Having spent most of five weeks living with Jim, Ronay moved out of the apartment and into a room at Agnes Varda's house on Rue Daguerre, where the filmmaker was working on dialogue for the script of *Last Tango In Paris* with director Bernardo Bertolucci. The film, starring Marlon Brando, released in 1972, about an American exiled – and dying – in Paris was, some said later, influenced by the Morrison story.

On the morning of Friday July 2 Morrison and Ronay walked in the Marais. Morrison bought Pamela jewellery. They ate at Ma Bourgogne, a restaurant specialising in the rich food of Alsace, where Morrison's hiccoughing fits returned. Jim called at the cobblers to collect some boots. Despite Ronay's insistence that Jim was not despondent he was agitated. After beers at Café de Phare, Ronay left for a dinner date with Varda. Morrison begged him to stay: "One more short beer! C'mon. Do it for an old friend." Ronay agreed. Morrison's hiccups were raging now. Ronay looked at Jim alive for the last time in the Place de la Bastille. He saw a face like a death mask. Sensing his stare, Morrison asked: "Well – what did you see?"

At Varda's house, Ronay recounted his unsettling afternoon. They went for dinner around the time Jim and Pam supposedly went to eat a Chinese meal. Ronay had recommended the couple go to see the film *Pursued*, a Freudian Western set in New Mexico, starring Robert Mitchum, about a young boy whose family is wiped out.

What happened in the hours between Ronay's departure that late afternoon, and the eventual death of Jim Morrison now becomes a mystery. At 5.40pm, the following day, July 3, Pamela gave her official statement to policeman Jacques Manchez, via Ronay's on the spot translation. The previous evening, she told Manchez, she felt ill, so Morrison dined alone in 'Le Quattier' Rue Saint-Antoine where he apparently ate sweet and sour Chinese washed down with plenty of beers. When he returned they – or maybe just Jim – went to the cinema Action Lafayette to see *La Vallee de la Peur*/aka *Death Valley*/aka *Pursued*.

Much to Morrison's annoyance the movie was badly sub-titled. Bored and opiated, Jim returned around 1am, July 3. As usual they built a fire – despite the warmth of the night. Jim started drinking whiskey. He tried to write at his desk, in the spiral-bound reporters pad that will become known as his last French Notebook. For the third day in a row he sniffed heroin off a mirror. He and Pam watched a sequence of their on-the-road-in-Europe Super-8 cine movies. Pam tells Manchez: "My friend [not once in her statement does she refer to Jim by name] appeared healthy and seemed very happy – but I noticed there was something not quite right about him. Later we played some records that I found in the bedroom and we played music for two hours lying on the bed… I think we fell asleep about 2.30 but I can't say when exactly. The record player turned itself off."

Manchez asks: "Did you have sex with the deceased?"

Pam replies: "No, we didn't have sex last night. About 3.30am, I think – there isn't a clock in the bedroom – my friend wakes me with the noise of his breathing. He was so noisy I got the impression he must need help. I wanted to help my friend. I asked him, did he want a doctor? No. He said he was OK, and he was going to take a hot bath. He got in the bath and then he called me because he felt sick… I took him in an orange saucepan, and my friend threw up the meal he'd eaten and I noticed… some blood clots.

"He is sick three times. Third time it' s just blood… I tipped the pan into the basin… then I washed it. Now my friend says he feels strange. 'But I don't feel ill enough for you to call me a doctor. I feel better now… It's over… Go to bed!' he tells me… 'I'm gonna stay in the bath, and I'll be in with you later'.

"I thought he seemed better, because he'd been sick, and his colour had returned, so I went back to bed feeling reassured. I don't know when I went back to sleep, but I woke up later and realised my friend wasn't in bed with me. I ran to the bathroom and saw he was still in the bath with his head back as if asleep. He had blood round his nostrils. I thought he must be ill, or he's unconscious. I tried to pull him out of the bath but it was impossible for me. At that point I called Mr Ronay and he came with Mrs Agnes Demy [aka Varda], and they called the police station for me."

That was Pam's statement. What she didn't tell the police, but *did* tell Ronay was this: Jim returns and listens to Doors albums, fixating on one particular song – *Not To Touch The Earth* (from the album *Waiting For The Sun*, which references the death of John F. Kennedy). The couple take more heroin. Jim carries on drinking. At 3am the couple start nodding out on the 86% pure smack that's slithering through the French underground scene.

If Pam's testimony to the police is to be believed, she is woken by Morrison's coughing fit. He runs a bath. The vomiting. The sleep. As dawn breaks, Pamela wakes to realise that Morrison is still in the bathroom. In an awful reminder of the *Cars Hiss By My Window* lyric – *'Can't hear my baby, though I call and call'* – she thinks she hears him cry out, "Pamela – are you there?" On finding him in the bath, Pam realises Jim Morrison is either dead or dying. She calls Ronay and Varda, and possibly, Count Jean de Breteuil.

Until recently, these have been the accepted versions of events. In 2007, however, Sam Bernett, a French-born former *New York Times* journalist and author of several books on French culture, published a book that confirmed a story that had circulated around Paris for 36 years.

Sam Bernett had been the house manager of the Rock'n'Roll Circus since its opening in 1969. According to Bernett, Morrison turned up at the club around 1am and ordered a bottle of vodka. Morrison was no stranger to

Jim Morrison contemplates "his last hitch-hike into the unknown."

ALAMY

Bernett either.

Bernett: "I was in the club that night July 2 and Jim came in at about 1am, July 3. He was at the bar as usual. He was with some friends who I didn't know. He was expecting people to bring him some stuff for Pamela. He was often in there doing that, or going to little cafés and dealers in the streets in Saint Germain. He was waiting. He drank, talked, I listened but I wasn't always next to him. I bought him drinks. About 2am two guys came and then for 20 minutes he wasn't at the bar. He disappeared." The two men were apparently dealers connected to Jean de Breteuil. Their real names have been lost to time, but it's alleged that one was nicknamed 'Le Chinois', the other 'Le Petit Robert'.

Bernett was next alerted by the cloakroom girl on the first floor. "She was worried because one door had been locked for a long time and people were complaining they couldn't get in. They banged on the door: 'Anyone there?' No answer. So I checked with her. No answer indeed. I didn't know Jim was behind the door. I called my security guy to smash the door open and inside was Jim. Sitting on the loo with no reaction, like he's sleeping or knocked out, his trousers slightly down. He was sitting with his head forward and his arms down – like a dead guy, actually. I shook him, I looked at his face, still no reaction. He had foam on his nose and lips. I told the girl to get a doctor. I had a friend, a customer there every night – he was in the club. He came, looked at Jim and started a little check-up, then he looked at me and said, 'That guy is dead'."

Bernett made to call the emergency services but the two dealers reappeared. "'He's not dead. He's just fucked up.' [they said] 'Don't call the police, don't call his family. We take him home, we know where he lives'. I said, 'That's impossible! We have to call the police and the medical people'. 'No!' they say. 'Forget it. We'll take him and we'll use a back door'. Then the club owner's right hand man appears and confirms: 'No trouble, no police. We don't want any scandal. They'll close us down'. I said, 'You can't do that!' 'No, I'm the boss – you do what I say'. The two guys packed him up and they took him out the club through the Alcazar out to the street door opposite the Rue de Seine and the entrance to the Circus. The Alcazar had closed, the cabaret was over, apart from a few people who looked to see what was happening. They took him to the apartment. I was told this – they put him in the tub and waited an hour and a half before calling the paramedic. Pamela was in the apartment, out of her mind, screaming. Completely stoned."

Agnes Varda was working on the script for *Last Tango In Paris* during – and some say influenced by – Jim's stay.

Bernett maintains his silence for 36 years, and then writes a book, *The End – Jim Morrison* (2007, Prive) – outside of France it is greeted with scepticism. But in a new interview with *Classic Rock*, Patrick Chauvel (now an award-winning war photographer – a profession that risk their lives to report the truth) bears out Bernett's version. Says Chauvel: "Jean-Marie Riviere, L'Alcazar boss and a king of the Parisian music halls and night club scene got involved. He spoke to several guys including me, and said, 'We've got a problem here'. They called in a doctor and asked us to stay around and, to make the [story] shorter, we had to take him out of there because if they find Jim Morrison dead in the club, that's the end of the club."

> "JIM CAME IN THE CLUB TO GET SOME STUFF FOR PAMELA. HE OFTEN DID THAT."
>
> *SAM BERNETT*

In his capacity as an employee, Chauvel did what he was told. "Was I scared? Hmm. It was a waste of somebody fantastic. Nobody knew about it apart from the few guys, the boss, Sam definitely, and maybe Cameron [Watson, a Parisian club DJ]. They all just wanted to keep it real quiet. It was an embarrassment so they took him via the tunnel between the clubs, which connected the cloakrooms, and up the stairs to the backstage street door. The boss was afraid of having a doctor or a newsman say anything, so they evacuated Jim, *et voila*, into the car."

And he helped? "Yes, I helped carry him in a blanket. I can't say 100% that he was dead, but he wasn't moving. That's for sure. Yeah, I thought 'This is bizarre', but I'd just come back from Vietnam. I'd seen a lot of weird things. Anyhow, he was then put into the back seat of a Mercedes. I don't know who drove the car. They took him home, is what they told me. I didn't see the car

leave, no. I helped put him in and then went back inside the Circus. They wanted everything to look as normal as possible. I remember they put him into the back seat very gently and that's why I thought he might still be alive. I saw that shape, that heavy shape."

And what did Chauvel think had happened to Jim? "I heard that the guy he was used to getting drugs from had changed, been arrested or something," he says. "So Morrison got involved with a new guy that night and the heroin wasn't the same at all. It was a lot more pure, and Jim didn't know that. And he overdosed."

If this account is correct, and many in Paris believe it to be, the official Pam Courson story must be substantially fictional. Chauvel even recalls the people who assisted. "I knew most of them by sight. I remember one name: Dominique Petrolaci, a Corsican. He was the head barman and a good friend who got me my job. He shot himself shortly afterwards at a party – put a shotgun through his mouth, in front of everybody."

Theories surrounding Jim's death are legion. During research for this piece a Parisian source offered the notion that Pamela wasn't in the apartment that night but was sleeping with an extremely famous (unnamed) French celebrity. But Count Jean de Breteuil was definitely spotted hanging around the street with a friend by Alain Ronay. "He looked like a ruffian," Ronay told Varda who recognised the man as well. "I wanted to spank his tailor," was Ronay's quaint appraisal.

'THE TWO DEALERS REAPPEARED. "HE'S NOT DEAD, HE'S JUST FUCKED UP" THEY SAID. "WE'LL TAKE HIM HOME."'

We'll never know whether Pam was home when the men arrived with the body. What we do know is Marianne Faithfull's claim that Pamela phoned Jean de Breteuil, at around 6am. According to Faithfull's autobiography, "We were staying at L'Hotel. Suddenly Jean had to leave. He slammed out the room. He didn't come right back. He returned in the early hours very agitated. I was fucked up on Tuinals. For no reason he beat me up. I asked him, 'Did you have a good time there?' He replied: 'Get packed, we're going to Morocco.'"

Faithfull claims Jean was "scared for his life. Jim Morrison had OD'd, and he had provided the smack. He saw himself as dealer to the stars. Now he was a small time dealer in big trouble. Jean took me to Tangier. It was a disaster. We were horribly strung out. In a panic before he left Paris he got rid of all his drugs." To make matters worse, the Count had been boasting that it was he who had sold Janis Joplin the fatal heroin that killed her in October 1970.

On Saturday July 3, Jean and Marianne arrived in Marrakech and stayed with his mother at the infamous jet-setting hang out Villa Taylor. The noted musicologist Roger Steffens had dinner with them and others that evening. He described an extraordinary night in a letter to his family dated July 9. "The Countess's son, Jean, the handsome 21 year old jet-setting playboy who inherits his late father's title this November, arrived unexpectedly in Marrakech last Saturday," he wrote. "The pair had just come from two violent days in Paris, which began with an auto crash, included an attempt by Jean's best friend to slash his wrists and culminated in a call from another old girlfriend of Jean's, Pamela Courson, who was staying in Paris with her husband [sic] Jim Morrison, lead singer of the Doors. She begged Jean to rush over to her place, and when he arrived they found Morrison dead in the bathtub of an apparent overdose of drugs. All these being too much, Marianne and Jean hopped a plane for Marrakech, and a peaceful, retreating week."

Today Roger recalls: "Jean and Marianne seemed very high and spaced out as they recounted the story. They were very upset… I met Jean through his mother, the Countess de Breteuil, second wife – and first love, though a commoner – of the late Count. Jean was the apple of his mother's eye, but in reality a profligate drug-dealer who left a long trail of disasters in his wake." He certainly did – they included Talitha Getty, Pamela Courson, Jim Morrison and himself. De Breteuil died within the year in Tangier of a massive heroin overdose.

Marianne Faithfull declined to be interviewed for this story.

Alain Ronay and Agnes Varda reappear in the official story when Pamela calls them at around 8am on Saturday July 3. "Please call an ambulance. I think my Jim is dying. He is in the bath. He has blood around his nose. Please call for me."

Varda now says: "Pamela called my house and I answered. I called for the firemen – *les pompiers*. In an accident you always call them, they are the first assistance – like paramedics. I told them: 'Go right away to this address. There is a scene there where maybe someone is out of life'. Ronay gave the exact address. We went together, we arrived, and the fireman said, 'It's too late – he's already dead.' Then the doctor comes [Max Vasille, Varda's family doctor], and does what doctors do. But it was hopeless."

What do Varda and Ronay make of Bernett's account? To Ronay, "Bernett's story about the toilet is ridiculous. Check the physical probability. People would notice a body. How did they carry it out of a club onto Rue Mazarine into a taxi and up three flights of stairs without anyone seeing them? It's impossible."

Agnes Varda is even more damning. "I never read his book but I know what he says is rubbish. All I know is I saw Jim Morrison a few days before he died and he didn't look good. He was not in good shit – this I remember. Then Pamela called me in the morning and she says he doesn't look good. Alain calls me the day before and Jim's not in good shape – so it was nothing special. He wasn't well. But look: I'm not the one holding his hand. Don't ask me what other people think. Don't quote me on someone else's silly book."

Is it silly? Bernett and Chauvel don't think so."At first I didn't think the *official* story was bullshit," says Chauvel. "I thought they took him back and he died in the bath trying to get his wits together. But why send for a doctor before they carried him out? As soon as it happened they closed down the toilets and put a guy on guard and said they were broken. It was the women's toilets. I'm not the only one telling this story. I don't think there's any doubt that he did not faint in the bathtub. He was definitely there that night. There is no doubt about that.

"Next day they said, or the rumours said, they stripped him and put him in that bath tub in very hot water – very hot so the doctor who confronted the death couldn't take an accurate temperature of the body. He would make a mistake [estimating the time of death] so maybe that's true. I don't know."

Far from being a story that lay untold for over 30 years, rumours were rife in Paris, with even local papers picking up on it. "I remember a newspaper article [in *Le Parisiene*] that appeared a few days after Morrison's death," recalls Chauvel. "[It] said – rough translation – 'Jim Morrison is dead but his corpse keeps moving around'."

The first official who saw Morrison's dead body was Alain Raisson, the French fireman/paramedic. Now living in Rio, he confirms the story of his arrival at the apartment with a team of five. The body was warm, so the team hurriedly tried to revive the singer. "We carried him onto the bed to do cardiac massage," he says. "We tried to revive him and failed. It was a short, intense, very real and brief encounter." The warmth, they realised later, had come from the still-warm bath.

The doctor who arrived a few minutes later was amazed when told that the man dressed in a Moroccan gown was only 27. "He looks much older. I would have said a 57 year-old," the doctor exclaimed. He was happy to suggest that the patient had died of natural causes. Heart failure, possibly brought about by respiratory problems, was his verdict. No need for an autopsy.

When Bernett wrote his book he contacted Raisson and the chief paramedic. "The fireman told me he knew Morrison died much earlier. He said 'This guy's been dead for a couple of hours, at least.' The police commissioner told me the same thing. 'We knew there was something wrong with the story,' he said. 'But, look it's summertime and I'm going on vacation tomorrow.' He wanted to wrap it up quick so he signed the papers. He didn't believe the story he was told in the apartment. He said it was strange and phoney, but he let it go."

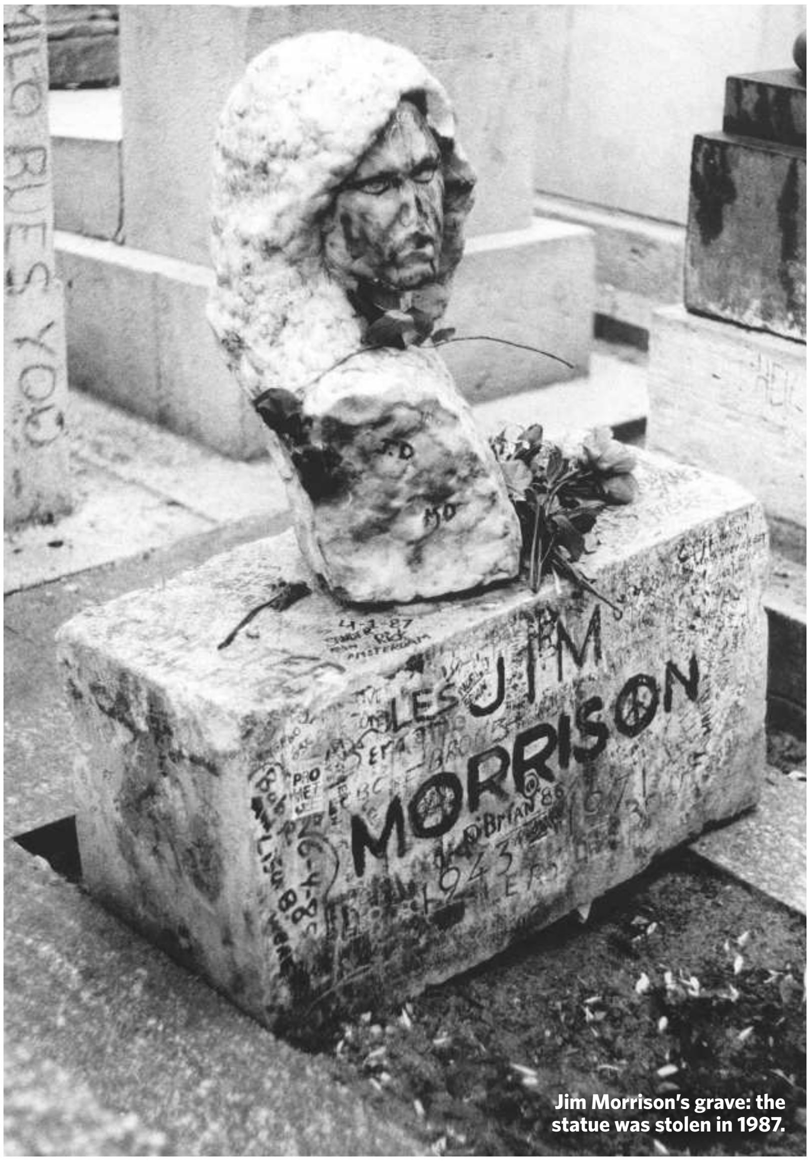
By 9am that Saturday the local police were swarming all over Rue Beautreillis and a small crowd of onlookers had gathered on the street. Courson and Ronay managed to leave the apartment on two occasions: to contact an undertaker, and to secure a Death Certificate at the Town Hall – much to the Chief of Police's annoyance. Before he arrived, Pamela managed to flush her stash of heroin down the toilet and burnt a selection of Jim Morrison's letters and notes. "Why?" she was asked later, as the grate smouldered. "They mustn't read this… this stuff," she announced, in her singsong voice.

In the small hours of July 3, some hours before the official time of death, a strange thing happened. At club La Bulle, DJ Cameron Watson made an announcement over the tannoy after being approached by two men. Cutting the music Watson called for silence. "Ladies and gentlemen, Jim Morrison has died tonight at the Rock'n'Roll Circus.' Rumours soon tore through Paris.

The Corsican mafia had killed Morrison. A Marseilles hit man had assassinated him. He'd died after a fight with the Count and his henchmen. He'd committed suicide. The CIA had given him the fatal OD. There were bloody daggers under his bath. He'd got two bullet wounds in the head. There were bruises on his body…

Amidst the conjecture, what is certain is that – rather than take the body to a morgue – Courson agreed to the French tradition of keeping Morrison's corpse in a coffin in the bedroom. Every so often an 'ice man' turned up with large blocks and canisters of dry ice to keep the body relatively fresh. "That's the way we can do it in France," says Varda. "The Spanish do it. The Jews and Arabs do it. The body is in good condition. [We did the] same with my husband Jacques Demy. We don't put it in a fridge or under the bed."

But contrary to reports that Pamela slept with Jim's body, Varda says, "Pam was not alone after Jim died. She stayed at my place and she went back to the apartment in the day. People were with her at all times. The secretaire [Robin Wertle] was there. The police and the undertaker had keys to Rue Beautreillis. When people say that Bill Siddons organised Jim's funeral at Pere Lachaise – no, he did not. I did that. I helped with all the arrangements. It wasn't easy getting a foreigner into Pere Lachaise. Anyway Jacques and I organised with Alain. The secretaire [Wertle] did nothing. I only noticed her at the funeral when I saw I was standing with another woman. There was no priest. It was all done quickly and properly. Just normal. Is it lucky to have been there? Would you love to have been there? The man was dead! I wish he were still alive. He cannot be replaced. *Voila!*"



Jim Morrison's grave: the statue was stolen in 1987.

JOHN WOOLFORD

'JEAN DE BRETEUIL WAS SCARED FOR HIS LIFE. JIM MORRISON HAD OD'D AND HE HAD PROVIDED THE SMACK".'

Ronay's twist is different again. "I buried Morrison in Pere Lachaise," he says. With deadly irony, Morrison apparently visited the cemetery at the end of June and was much taken by the artistic bent of the inhabitants. "It was my idea. I was the only person at the funeral parlour. I picked the site. I went alone. Agnes had nothing to do with it. Bill Siddons can't take credit. Can he speak French? Give me a break. Enough already. Robin Wertle? Nothing to do with it. She's disappeared. I guess like in all good mysteries she reappears later.

"Pam was contacted by Siddons. She had no money and she was losing control. Agnes was good to her. Agnes drove me to the funeral. Pam wanted Jim buried in L.A. for God's sake! What? And have bus tours stopping every two hours?"

On Monday July 5 Doors manager Bill Siddons received a call from Clive Selwood in the London Elektra office telling him, "Three journalists have called me and asked if Morrison is dead". Siddons spent six hours calling Pam, reaching her at noon. Siddons: "I told her, 'I'm a friend. I'm coming to Paris now'. It was a weird flight. I wasn't going as an official representative of the Doors; I simply went to help her. I got to the apartment on Tuesday morning while all the local workers were in the cafés drinking their coffee and brandy. Pam was alone. She was coherent but totally distraught. She'd hit the wall. I cooperated as best as I could. I was only 21. I had no tools to deal with this. We ran round the city all day. She filed a report at the American embassy [the form 'The Death of an American Citizen Abroad'] and we went to the funeral house." There was a story that he'd arranged for a more expensive white ash coffin in which to bury his friend. "That's untrue," he says.

Siddons' first impression on meeting Jim Morrison when he was the Doors teenage roadie had been, "he scared me to death". He had no desire to see his friend's body, which was now finally sealed for burial. The fact that no one from the Doors' camp saw Jim's body became one of the cornerstones of the 'Jim is alive' conspiracy theory. It's not one to which Siddons subscribes. "We buried Jim on Wednesday 7," he says. "It was morning. His body was picked up at the apartment. I travelled with Pamela and the secretary Robin Wertle to the cemetery. Ronay and Varda followed separately…" There were four unknown pallbearers. "Everyone was distraught but it was a nice little goodbye ceremony. Pam said some words. I don't remember what. [She recited some words from Morrison's poem *The Severed Garden*]. I don't know what happened to Robin. I haven't spoken to her in 20 years. She wanted nothing to do with the obsession. She was clear on that. She served Jim and Pam very well – and Jim and Pam are gone. I have a high regard for Robin. She was a class act."

None of the Doors or anyone at Elektra was invited to the funeral. "But that's not weird at all," says Siddons, who released a statement on Thursday, July 8 after flying back with Pamela to Los Angeles. "We – *I* – wanted the funeral low-key. I saw what happened with Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin. Jim was buried with the respect and consideration he deserved as a great poet and artist. I don't know about the theories surrounding Jim's death. All I know is Pam told me he died of a heart attack. She simply said, 'I went to check on him… and he was no longer with us.'"

Back in LA, the remaining Doors heard the news via Siddons' telephone call. Ray Manzarek says, "In one way I wasn't surprised at all. Jim broke the circle. When I heard he was dead I said, 'See! That'll teach yer – you can't burn the candle at both ends!' Yeah, I thought his excesses would do him in. Of course we were devastated. We went into the studio the next day to work. It was security. It was like my brother had died."

James Douglas Morrison's final notebook contained the harrowing message: 'Last words, Last words. Out'. Also a chilling self-assessment: 'Regret for wasted nights & wasted years – I pissed it all away – American Music.'

July 3, 1971. Paris. It was to be Jim Morrison's last hitchhike into the unknown.

Thanks and gratitude to Gilles Yepremian for his selfless assistance. And to the Freedom Man, for the Dallas CD.

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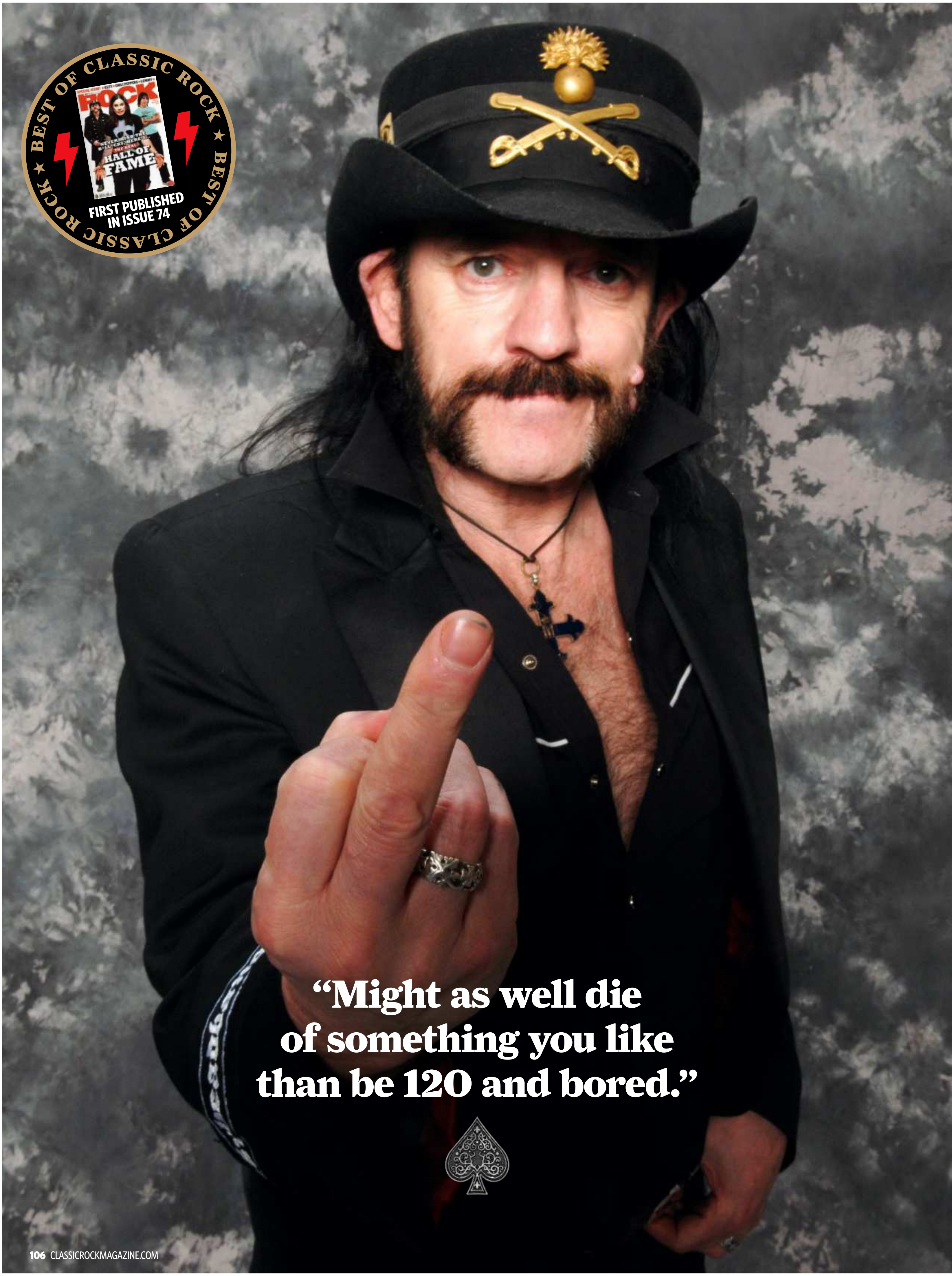


BEST OF CLASSIC ROCK ★ BEST OF CLASSIC ROCK ★

FIRST PUBLISHED IN ISSUE 74

"Might as well die of something you like than be 120 and bored."

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO LEMMY

In 2004, Classic Rock spent an afternoon drinking with the legendary **Motörhead** frontman while he imparted the wisdom that life had taught him. This is what we learned…

"Don't look at his toe," says Lemmy's press guy, Nik. Too late. In a hotel room in London, Lemmy Kilmister is surrounded by empty bottles of Jack Daniel's and old prescription slips. Lemmy's done something to his foot, you see, and has been confined to this room for over a week.

Before we can look away, he holds his foot up as evidence – his big toe looks like a mouldy old parsnip that's been lying in a pool of stale milk at the bottom of your fridge. It's enough to drive you to drink. So we let it.

Despite all this – or maybe because of it – Lemmy's on top form, doling out JD and Cokes all afternoon, playing us tracks scheduled for a forthcoming solo album (Lemmy with guests including Dave Grohl and the Reverend Horton Heat), and holding forth on everything from drugs to marriage to Emperor Hirohito. So hold on to your hats and prepare yourself for the wisdom of Lemmy – what he's learned in his 59 years of rock and rolling. Or at least what he can remember…

All I learned at school was how to dodge fighting and how to smoke.
And what girls' tits looked like.

There's a fine line between a heavy drinker and an alcoholic.
Just like there's a fine line between just fishing and standing on the bank looking like an arsehole. The line is whether the fuck you know what you're doing when you drink 'cos if you don't know what you're doing, you just become a terrible boring drunk. Whereas, if you know when to stop, you become an amazing, anecdotal man of the world. Which is better than being the guy having a shit in the bath tub.

I don't even get drunk any more.
A kid once said to me: "Do you get hangovers?" I said: "To get hangovers you have to stop drinking."

Journalists are the worst drinkers in the world.
Or were. Rock journalists are a really boring crowd now. Sit around drinking plastic bottles of fucking Evian.

The music business is all geared up to stealing your money.
It's just like any other business – they're out to make money, not to be good people. If you're a businessman you can't be a pleasant person. Business is 'how to be a cunt', basically. The bigger the cunt, the more successful the businessman.

I know what I'm doing.
I know what Motörhead's for. I know who it appeals to. And I know it could appeal to a lot more people if we had the coverage.

People are much weirder up north, aren't they?
You get real quality shit up there. You don't get people with affectations: these people are fucking serious.

I've never understood why anyone would need a double-necked bass.
I don't even understand why you'd need a five-string. What're you gonna do? Play bigger chords? Have more room to twiddle on? I hate twiddlers and they hate me. And that's just fine.

Scotch makes me hit people.
Bourbon's a mellow high. I used to drink Scotch but I went off it. I hit a door post once and it really fucking hurt. Who did I miss? Oh, nobody famous. He would've been famous if I'd connected.

I am a womaniser, but that doesn't mean you can't respect people.
I don't understand racism or sexism – I don't get any of it. As far as I can see, a lot of feminist things that have happened have made men happy, not women. It's given women unattainable goals to shoot for. The people expounding the thing in the first place are college people, sitting in a studio in the city. But some girl in fucking Newcastle has got no chance of following them. If a girl isn't strong enough to buck the system, they're just gonna get married like they would have in any other generation but they're gonna be even more unhappy because of all this freedom they've read about which they aren't getting.

If a woman likes you, you're not bothered why they like you.
I'm really shallow like that. People say: "Doesn't it bother you that they just want you because you're famous?" And I say: "No. Never did. Ever. Not for one second." They can have me – I'm a whore, always was. In fact they don't even have to pay me.

"A kid said to me: 'Do you get hangovers?' I said: 'To get hangovers you have to stop drinking.'"

GETTY

The classic Motörhead line-up: (l-r) Fast Eddie Clarke, Philthy Animal Taylor, Lemmy.

GETTY

To a lot of people, magazines are like pictures of another world –because they are pictures of another world.
That world's never gonna show up in Cowdenbeath.

People would say: "Have you slept with her?"
I'd say: "Oh, we didn't have time to sleep. We were too busy fucking." Aids wasn't a wake up call, it was a go-to-sleep call.

Love's a rather miserable condition.
Makes you act like an idiot, knocks all your defences down, you tear yourself in knots, and then they leave you. Brilliant.

Most love is unrequited, which is where we get all the good songs from.
Thank God it's unrequited, when you look at it like that.

If I settled down, I wouldn't be hungry any more.
I'd be thirsty.

Monogamy is possible – I'm doing it – but I don't think it's advisable.
I think polygamy is a really good idea. Nothing works over any extended time. I'm a sucker for romance but the trouble is that you can't make the fucker last – you can't have that blaze happening all your life.

The William Morris Agency made me take drugs!
We did a tour in 1979 – the Bomber tour, which was 53 shows in 56 states – and I don't care who the fuck you are, you're not gonna do that without some help.

"I'm a whore, always was. In fact they don't even have to pay me."

Drugs are very subjective.
They're in the brain cell of the beholder. When I was growing up, drugs were all the go, everybody was doing them, so I did them. Smoking dope and acid. But there was a great innocence attached to them. No one had died yet. Heroin hadn't showed up and downers hadn't come in. The deals were a lot better then too. Then came the birth of the rabid dealer – with the gun in his pocket. And that's what changed it – the money you could make.

I would not advise drugs to any person, ever, of any kind.
If you think you have to try them then go ahead. I can't stop you. If you're thinking about it, you're going to do it anyway. But drugs are very powerful things – you can't just try it and go back to the way you were before, because they're going to change you. Sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. Mostly for the worse. If you're sticking needles in yourself, then that's very bad news. Even with my famous rep, not once. Never ever.

I used to say that getting married was the only mistake I didn't make.
But the other mistake I didn't make was to stick needles in myself to get high.

You should know who the fuck you are before you start doing drugs.
I was 18, 20 before I started doing any dope. At least you had a vague idea of what you wanted to do with your life and who you were. That's hard to fathom for some kids now because they think they're adults when they're 12.

I come from a broken home.
I broke it.

I'm not religious.
My father was a priest. Anglican vicar, Church Of England. He left my mother and me when I was three months old, so that let religion down, right there. Then my mother wanted to marry my stepfather and he was Roman Catholic – he'd been devout all his life – so he wrote to the Vatican to get dispensation to marry my mother because she was a divorcee. They sent him a letter – this is the Vatican, right? The fucking Pope – saying that he could only marry my mother if he declared me illegitimate. That's the church, man. A fashion show for fags, right? So he wrote back and said: "Excommunicate my ass." And they did. They excommunicated him. It didn't seem to blight his happiness at all, from what I could see.

KEVIN NIXON/METAL HAMMER MAGAZINE/FUTURE

Another quiet night out with Lemmy…

God's a crutch for people who don't know who they are.
I'm responsible for what I do. And I'll take responsibility for everything I've said and done. I don't need to hide behind the devil. "The devil made me do it!" Well, you shoulda put your fingers in your fucking ears! God would've helped you put your fingers in your ears, wouldn't he? Might have even put His Holy Fingers in your ears.

Religion's just spiritual insurance.
Put a few quid in the plate every month and then you think you're going to heaven later.

Everybody that's good goes to heaven?
Must be fucking crowded up there! How are you going to find your loved ones? Are they gonna post a notice? "Coming up this week…" I'm going to Hell – that's where all the pool tables are. You can't imagine a pool table in Heaven, can you?

If I believe in anything, I believe in reincarnation.
Because you have these flashes of memory of something you've never known before. And then you have periods of history you're really interested in and other periods you couldn't give a shit about – even though they're just as interesting. But you just don't have a connection with them. Other bits you have a connection with, and I think it's because you were alive in those bits. That makes sense to me. But then, who says it has to make sense? That's just wishful thinking of another kind…

It always killed me about Japan.
The Emperor Hirohito – he's the son of heaven. Why did he need glasses? It's obviously ridiculous right there, but no one dare question it because he's the emperor.

You may as well die of something you like.
Or you'll live to 120 and be bored shitless. If you're gonna rail at me for smoking a cigarette in a restaurant but let cars drive by outside, then just fuck off, OK? You've got these people on pavement cafés, doggedly not smoking, and the traffic's three feet away! Fuck off! If you wanna ban cars and have rickshaws and shit then – fine – I'll stop smoking. But don't fuck around.

I'm proud to be English, but I can't live here now.
I don't know how anybody can afford to live here now. I went to America to live, right? The sun belts down all the time. The chicks wear less clothing because of that fact. And everything's half price. Any questions?

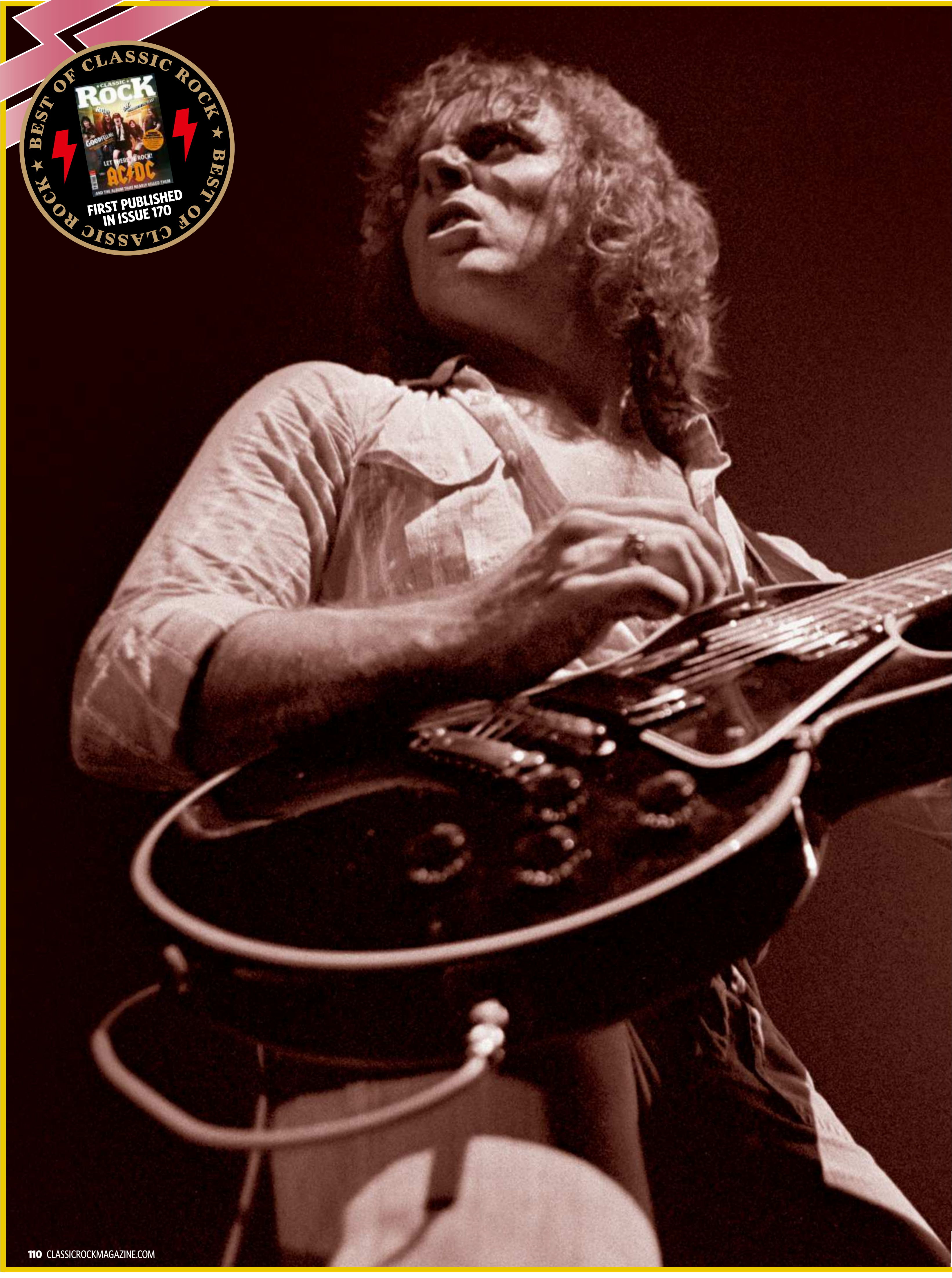
There's a line that you do not cross.
It's like your own personal Alamo. Some shit you know is shit, so you don't do it. If it gets to the stage that you're gonna be ashamed of something, then you don't do it. You think: "If I was 14 and I saw Eddie Cochran doing this, would I be embarrassed for him?" If the answer's yes, then turn the motherfucker down.

Motörhead songs use violent images but to promote non-violence.
I don't believe in wars. Why don't they get the guy who's in charge of the insurgents in Iraq and George W Bush and get them to fight it out in an arena? You could sell tickets to that motherfucker.

I pretended to like jazz for about three years, but it cost me dear.
The last time I went to a jazz concert, my mate was a sax player and he got up and he played the most appalling bunch of crap I've ever heard in my life. And before he was finished the audience was on its feet and I thought: "This is the blind leading the fucking blind. He can't play, and they can't hear." Free-form jazz gives you a licence to shit in the street.

I don't think Pete Townshend will ever speak to me again.
Do you remember when he impaled his hand on the whammy bar of his guitar? The Who did a show at the Albert Hall and I went down to see them and went backstage and Pete says: "Oh, hello Lemmy." And I shook his fucking hand! He gritted his teeth – he was a man about it – but I don't think he'll forgive. I'm sure he reads *Classic Rock*, so: sorry, Pete. I've got the foot now if you wanna come and stamp on it.

"God's a crutch for people who don't know who they are. I'm responsible for what I do."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The Search for Ronnie Montrose

As guitarist and leader of his eponymous band, Ronnie Montrose shaped the sound of 70s hard rock. But he remained an elusive figure, as *Classic Rock* found out when we spent two years trying to track him down in the early 2010s – only for Ronnie to die just days before the feature went to press…

Words: **Jaan Uhelszki**

GETTY; 57 DESIGN

Ronnie Montrose's bulldog Lola is dead. The man who created the blueprint for American hard rock, gave Sammy Hagar his first big break, then saddled him with such an inferiority complex about his abilities it took him years to overcome it – is on the phone. He's explaining that both he and his wife/manager Leighsa are bereft over the loss of their pet and they would like to cancel our scheduled interview.

Given the circumstances, that would be a perfectly understandable reason to call it off, except that for the past two years, the guitarist has dodged my attempts to chronicle his remarkable yet strangely untold story. A man who truly does want his music to do the talking. The problem is, it hasn't spoken loud enough to allow this self-taught guitar savant – who didn't pick up a guitar until he was 17 – to get his proper due.

But the odd thing is, I don't think he really cared.

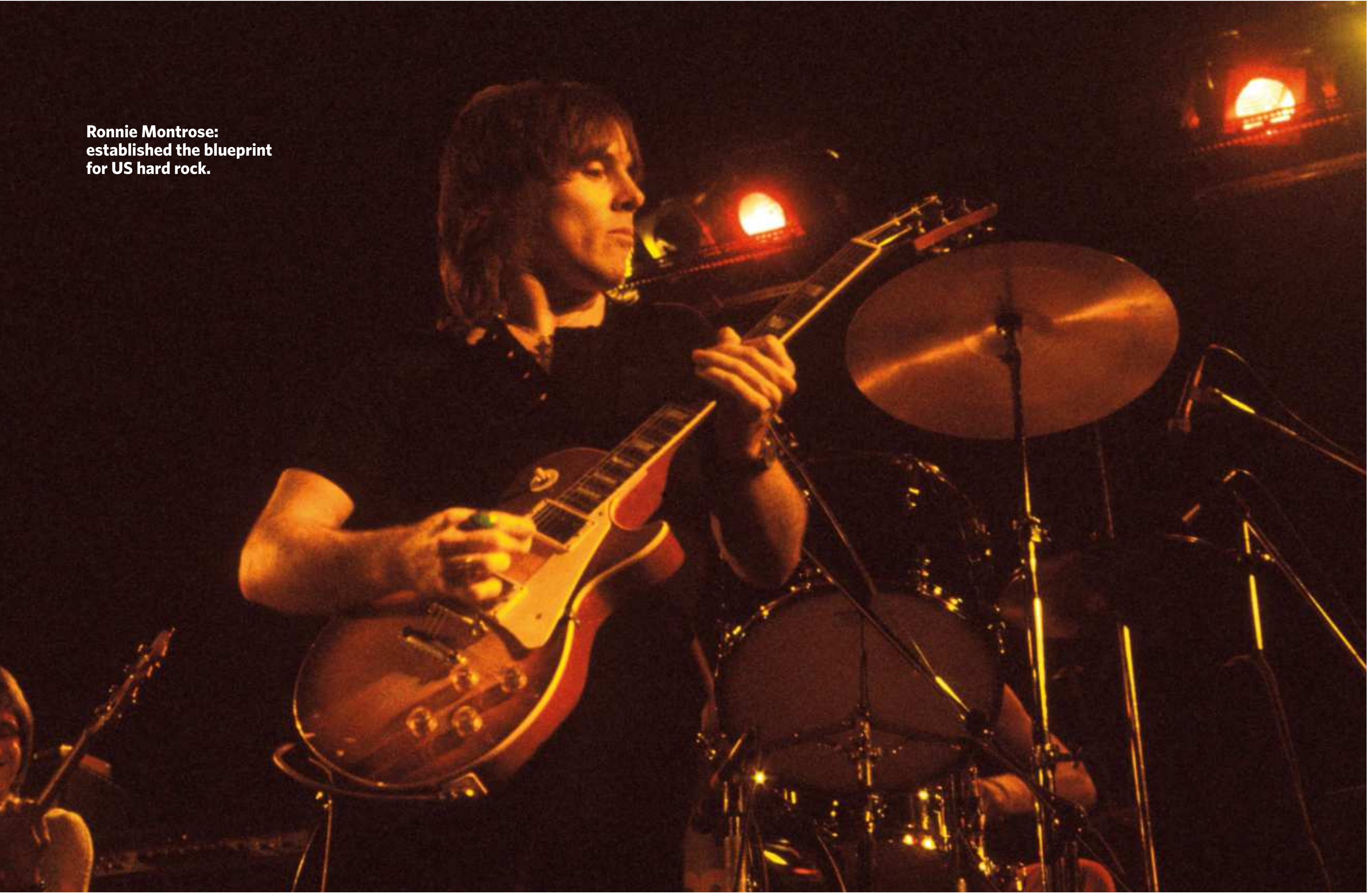
Ronnie Montrose would do anything to get out of an interview. His list of excuses included being "on tour", "scheduling", "travelling", having had "very little sleep" and even mixing me up with a Nordic death metal writer. The death by suicide of this most mysterious man on March 3, 2012 is just the latest tactic to avoid talking about a life that most rock stars would be eager to shout about…

"The thing that I cherish the most is that I fucking survived," the guitarist told me in one of a series of short phone conversations we did manage over the past couple of years. He wasn't just talking about the prostate cancer that sidelined him from 2008-2011 and would, sadly, unexpectedly, finally claim him. "I survived this gauntlet of life… Your life is a series of obstacles thrown at you that you ducked and weaved and figured out how to navigate, and what happens then is just the luck of the draw. It's the turn of a friendly card. You either get it or you don't. The things I've been through in my life, I actually wouldn't change now. There were certain times that I said I wish I could change them but now I realise they've made me what I am."

What is that exactly? I asked.

"A survivor," he said quietly. "I put a quote on one of my records that said: 'The only path to here and now is the one you've travelled.'"

Ronnie Montrose travelled a long way. Born in San Francisco in 1947, his family moved to Denver, Colorado before he was two. By the time The Byrds had released *Eight Miles High* he was making regular visits to the city of his birth. By the next year he had moved there. Some say he was transporting nefarious substances between the two cities; others say it was just happenstance and cheap airfares. But whatever it was, there was a sense that the 20-year-old knew that a cultural groundswell was just about to happen and he wanted to be at the centre of it.



Ronnie Montrose: established the blueprint for US hard rock.

"Ronnie was a visionary. He had it all figured out. The playing. The chops. The chemistry. The haircut..." Denny Carmassi

"He's always been a kind of a visionary," former Montrose drummer Denny Carmassi tells me on the phone from Oregon.

"It's something he should be proud of. At one point he had everything figured out. The playing, the chops, the chemistry. And you can't forget the haircuts. He was a visionary with a great haircut."

There is one thing you need to know about Ronnie Montrose: he had an uncanny command of place and time – a sixth sense about where he should be, and with whom. You could almost call it geographic or maybe musicological ESP. It's what led him to arrive in San Francisco just as they were passing out the blotter acid and the beads during the Summer Of Love. It was the same sense of providence that impelled him to get an apartment in a Victorian house called Thin Blue that housed his original Bay Area band Sawbuck, where one night Buddy Miles brought Jimi Hendrix after they'd played the Fillmore in the Band Of Gypsies.

It was certainly serendipitous when Montrose got a gig doing carpentry work for rock impresario Bill Graham and his partner, producer David Rubinson, when they had the Fillmore record label in San Francisco. Building wall partitions for the their shared office space was exactly the right place to be when Van Morrison called the office looking for a new guitarist. He auditioned and got the gig.

"I didn't have total confidence in my guitar playing then," said Montrose. "Not at all. But I went to audition. How could I not? This was Van Morrison. *Gloria*, Van Morrison. Them, Van Morrison. There were probably 10 guitar players out there and they all had their little amps and their guitars and they were sitting in chairs out in front of the Lion's Share where the audience would sit.

"He called us up one at a time. It was the weirdest thing but even before he called me I knew I had the job. Because I knew I belonged there, and it was like this supernatural thing. I knew it from the minute he asked me where I was from. I told him: 'Denver, Colorado.' And he told me, 'Okay. You're in.' What I didn't know at the time was he loved cowboys, he loved the whole Western thing. It wasn't until later that I knew that. Peter Wolf told me later that Van called him and said, 'Wolf, I got myself a cowboy.'

"I had the same feeling when I went out to audition for Edgar Winter's band. I played on a friend of mine's demo and Edgar heard it. The friend called me up from New York and said Edgar Winter wanted me to fly to New York too, he's looking to put a rock'n'roll band together. 'I'm a California hippie. I don't want to do that,' I told him. 'I don't want to go to New York, and you better give me a round-trip ticket so I can come back home if I'm not happy.' I asked for it, but I had that feeling that they were going to hire me, and I secretly knew I'd never use that return portion."

Through his work with Morrison, Montrose met former Harpers Bizarre drummer Ted Templeman, who was producing Van's *Tupelo Honey*, only his third job as a producer. The soon-to-be-famous Templeman told Ronnie if he ever wanted to do something on his own to call him. Ronnie never forgot the offer.

"Ronnie has always been a very creative guy," Templeman says, from his home in Los Angeles. "If you listen to the Van Morrison records it really foreshadows a lot of Ronnie's brilliance in music. The song that I really love is *Listen To The Lion*."

Templeman then sings Montrose's guitar part.

"Ronnie was so great at those octaves. I told him, get together with Sammy [Hagar]. Sammy was working in the Fillmore in an R&B thing; I thought the two of them together made perfect sense. And it did. I loved doing those first Montrose albums. In fact Van Halen took everything from that first album. They even wanted me to use Ronnie's amp," the iconic producer laughs. "Even Billy Idol's guitar player Steve Stevens took a lot of stuff from that album. Especially from *Space Station #5*. You can hear it on that early Billy Idol album. And Ronnie was real creative in Edgar Winter's group..." Templeman trails off.

As the guitarist for Edgar's group he played two solos simultaneously on the band's second single *Free Ride* to give it an Eric Clapton feel, and turned *Frankenstein* into a mathematical thrill ride up the *Billboard* chart with its psychedelic embellishments and finessed guitar runs – earning its instrumental freak-out a place in the classic rock pantheon along with *Free Bird* and *Stairway To Heaven*. This is where Montrose developed his signature sound.

GETTY X2

Rock guitar wasn't Montrose's forté when he joined the Edgar Winter band. "He so much wanted to do that whole rock thing that he encouraged me," Montrose confessed. "It was the most exponential jump I made, and I had to do it. I don't want to call it a struggle. It was a sense of need, that I needed to survive this gauntlet that had been dropped. For me it literally was sink or swim. My grasp of the reality of the fact that I was in the Edgar Winter Group, and I had better start delivering this heavy guitar music. Now. Because I hadn't done it before. I was with Van Morrison. I was, like, *Tupelo Honey*.

"My watershed was when we were in Pittsburgh we did this song *Tobacco Road*. I was playing my rudimentary scale stuff and I heard some guy in the crowd go: 'Play some fucking vibrato, man.' And it hit me so deep, I go: 'You know what? You're right.' So then I started realising that this was a voice that needed to be brought out."

It was a serious dive into rock guitardom. While a sonic innovator and an important component of the success of Edgar Winter's *They Only Come Out At Night*, the guitarist was not casting his lot in with rock's albino futurist jazz-funk fusion for any extended period of time. "Edgar used to say to me: 'Ronnie, I'm just trying to do my thing and then you always take me somewhere else,'" recalls Montrose.

Pretty soon, the guitarist realised that *he* actually needed to be somewhere else.

It would be safe to say Montrose was in Winter's band, but not of it. There was always something removed about the guitarist, holding himself at a distance from the rhythm section, bassist Dan Hartman and drummer Chuck Ruff. As for Edgar Winter, those feelings were complicated. It was the latest in a repeating pattern of interactions between the guitarist and the singer in whatever bands he happened to be in.

Former Montrose bassist Bill Church, who was both in Sawbuck with Montrose and in Van Morrison's band, remembers that dynamic very well.

"We got along great, are you kidding?" Church tells me. "On the personal side of things he and I were a lot alike. We became great fishing buddies. We would bring our acoustic guitars and go up to Eagle Lake, places like that to fish. But Ronnie and Mojo Collins – the so-called star of Sawbuck, the songwriter and lead singer – they hated each other. So that was friction. That was the start of that pattern. It showed up in Van's band, too: Ronnie does one album with us, and does half a tour. Then it all ends with Van's famous quote: 'Hey Ronnie,' Van says. 'When the bus stops, somebody's gotta get off.'

"It was just the result of a guy who wants to be Jimmy Page, meeting a guy who is a jazz singer and doesn't even consider guitar a frontline instrument. The show when it all came to a head is when we played Pauley Pavilion at UCLA. Normally in Van's band we'd stay back behind him and just support him. But at this particular show, Ronnie and I decided we're going to go to the front of the stage. Van didn't get too mad at me though because I had had an eye injury and I was on heavy painkillers, but that was the end of Ronnie right there.

"But everything has a silver lining because immediately Bill Graham hooked Ronnie up with the connection with the Edgar Winter Group.'"

Once in Winter's group, that same dynamic reared its head. "I used to fly out to see Ronnie and Chuck Ruff – who was my oldest friend," remembers Church. "They both were in Edgar's band. I didn't know really at first what he was up to, but he was plotting leaving Edgar because, of course, he and Edgar hated each other.

"I'll never forget how he pried open his gold record for *They Only Come Out At Night*, and took a little Exacto knife and cut out the little picture of Edgar's face – you know how they put a little album picture on the gold record – and then hung it on the wall that way.

"One day he called me up and goes: 'Hey, I'm quitting Edgar Winter.' I told him he was crazy. 'You got the biggest album in the world and you're leaving?' He goes: 'Yup. And if I got the guts to do that, you got the guts to quit Van…'"

Until that day came, Montrose shared a house in the upscale suburb of Byram, Connecticut with Dan Hartman and Chuck Ruff. He didn't live in the main house with the other two, but instead bunked in servants' quarters that were situated to the left of the main house. It was another repeating pattern of Ronnie's. When he lived in Thin Blue in San Francisco, he ➜

Montrose: (clockwise from front centre) Ronnie Montrose, Denny Carmassi, Bill Church and Sammy 'Sam' Hagar.

stayed with his wife Jill and their infant son Jesse, behind the Victorian house in a refurbished garage apartment, only interacting with his fellow band members when Sawbuck practised in the bright blue house's upper floors.

It was outside those two-room servants' quarters in Bryam on a bitterly cold day in March 1973, that I got my first glimpse of Ronnie Montrose. Standing just under 5'8", he could have been a member of the Small Faces, with chiselled cheekbones sharp enough to cut a block of cheese, and a grown-out mod haircut that brought to mind a better-looking Steve Marriott. But his eyes said it all. Green with dangerous glint, you knew that he was capable of pinning you to the opposite wall of you did something untoward.

"A friend's mom once told me: 'Well, honey, gosh darn it, you've got some eyes that, when they look at you, you know you've been looked at,'" Ronnie Montrose said. It was that kind of look that fed the rumours that one of the reasons that he had been ousted from Van Morrison's band was that Morrison's wife Janet Planet had taken a shine to the guitarist when they were recording *Tupelo Honey*, and she wasn't the only one.

Which was exactly why I was there. I had been staying 10 minutes down the road in nearby Greenwich, Connecticut at the Alice Cooper band's 40-room mansion where they had just recorded *Billion Dollar Babies*. I was on assignment to write about the release, and was staying a few extra days at the rambling, Spanish-style mansion with a friend from high school who was the titular girlfriend of Cooper guitarist Glen Buxton. What she really was, was in love with Ronnie Montrose.

Alice and his girlfriend were nowhere to be found, living a more public life in a New York penthouse, and Buxton was back in Phoenix recovering from pancreatitis, making it easy for my beautiful friend Linda and I to make stealth visits in his vintage Grand Prix to nearby Byram, a town more famous for supplying the stone for the base of the Statue Of Liberty than it was for housing most of the members of the Edgar Winter Band.

I was there the week that *Frankenstein* had entered the *Billboard* chart, beginning its rapid climb to the top, and the band members were in a rather jubilant mood. All except Ronnie. He seemed curiously nonplussed by the accomplishment, as if he had other things on his mind. It turned out that he did. Two months later, he would be on his way back to California to form his own band. But no-one knew it at the time. Especially not my friend Linda, who hooked a proprietary arm around his neck and kissed him full on the lips.

"Are you ready to go baby?" she asked him. "Almost. Let me grab something." Montrose disappeared into the bedroom, returning with a brown leather bomber jacket and a pair of cowboy boots. The three of us squeezed in the front seat of the guitarist's compact and headed for Manhattan. They promised to take me to the apartment of a fellow rock critic in Chelsea. But traffic was appalling on that Sunday night and they were running late for their rendezvous at Johnny Thunders' apartment. So Ronnie made a unilateral decision to drop me off in Times Square instead, an idea that terrified me, given that this was my very first trip to New York.

"You'll be alright," he told me blandly, brooking no room for argument, before depositing me in this stewing nest of brilliant neon, fast-food joints and scowling humanity.

Until this year, that was the last time I ever saw Ronnie Montrose. 'See' being the operative word.

Ronnie Montrose (second left) with the Edgar Winter Group.

GETTY X2

"I was sure Montrose was going to be the next Led Zeppelin, Rolling Stones, Beatles, whatever." Sammy Hagar

My search for Ronnie Montrose has been nothing short of a quest. Video gamers know there are several types of quests. Typically, there's the slay-the-dragon quest, the rescue quest (where you find someone and bring them back to safety), the fetch quest, where you find an item – a weapon, a sword, or maybe a key – and retrieve it, and the escape quest, where you are captured and must find a way out.

If I look at it honestly, I think mine was a combination of at least three of them. As for the slay-the-dragon quest? If anything, *Montrose* – the debut album his own band released in 1973 – is Ronnie's own personal Loch Ness monster. Until maybe three years ago, he would do anything in his powers to drive a stake in its heart.

"Ronnie said to me: 'I've been talking about this record for 35 years, I'm tired of talking about it,'" Montrose drummer Denny Carmassi tells me. "I think he's making a big mistake by looking at it that way. It's something he should be proud of. "

But Ronnie Montrose is proud of other things.

"The main thing I felt, when I did my first record, was I just felt happy about my sense of accomplishment, that I had done something. Even with Van Morrison it was like that."

This quest began a little over two years ago in the winter of 2010. *Classic Rock* had heard that Ronnie Montrose lived near me outside of San Francisco and asked me to track him down and see if he'd consent to an interview. He'd been off the grid for a few years and people were starting to wonder if the guitarist was still with us.

He was, although he had gone underground for about 18 months after a fight with prostate cancer, not even picking up a guitar for over two years. But he hadn't perished, and had beaten the disease – without undergoing chemotherapy. Which, given the musician's formidable will and complicated belief system, seemed entirely possible.

After about two months of phone calls, internet searches, calling acquaintances of acquaintances and querying venues where Montrose had recently

Rock candy: Ronnie onstage in California in 1979.

played, I got my first break from a friend whose wife is a wedding photographer. I had complained to him that I was about to hire a private investigator to find the missing musician, when he told me to save my money.

"I see him at weddings all the time," my friend told me. "His wife is a florist and an event planner and he helps her carry in the flowers."

My friend gave me her contact info, and the next day I Googled her and found that she was indeed an award-winning florist. We exchanged cordial emails and she promised that her husband would contact me soon. To his credit, he did, and we planned to meet for an interview. But somehow the date came and went. I emailed again. And again. Plans were tentatively made and not-so-tentatively broken, when all the while he would play local shows and appear on hard rock radio stations, telling the same rather sanitised story of the time when Montrose was at the top of rock's slag heap. It was as if he wanted to downplay his own legacy.

I wondered how he could discount the impact that the fully realised debut Montrose album had on creating the blueprint for what was to come. It left clues as to where rock should be headed in a post-Altamont future – looking forward instead of back for inspiration. *Montrose* has been called "a pillar of tone that holds up the house of rock" and, in Sammy Hagar biographer Joel Selvin's words, "a song like *Rock Candy* is a cornerstone of hard rock upon which a whole school of music was built".

Not to acknowledge the album's enduring influence seemed like heresy.

I was appalled when I heard Montrose call in from his car barrelling down California's freeways to banter with some radio DJ in Oregon, blithely skipping over the reason he dismantled a band that was poised to challenge rock's mighty élite. A band that had enough firepower, audacity and talent to knock bands like Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple off their exalted perches on rock's Olympus. Montrose even attracted the attention of the then often-comatose Keith Richards with their version of the Rolling Stones' *Connection*. Richards came to see the band when they were opening for Little Feat in Amsterdam, and left singing their praises.

Ronnie's downplaying of this legacy is something that confounds Sammy Hagar to this day. "I was so sure that we were going to go all the way that I had an astrology chart drawn up the day Montrose was formed," the singer tells me over the phone from his home in Marin County, California. "I thought it was going to the next Led Zeppelin, Rolling Stones, Beatles, whatever. I mean that was my ambition in that band, and if Ronnie wouldn't have fired me, I was definitely a lifer there. I was just naïve. I didn't know what I was doing and I was really pushing for it to go all the way to the top."

But after two albums, Montrose fired the man who came to be called the Red Rocker.

"Between you and I, Ronnie ruined that band. He killed that band. It wasn't anybody else's fault," Hagar huffs, still rankled almost 40 years later. "I rubbed him wrong by accident because I was ambitious and I wanted to be a star. I wasn't trying to step on him or prevent him from being one himself. I wanted him and I to be the stuff. But for some reason Ronnie didn't want to share that with anyone. He didn't, and he ended up firing everyone and becoming a solo artist. We always joke, the other guys in Montrose and me, Denny and Bill. I say that Ronnie fired me – fired everybody – and finally fired himself."

I was beginning to feel like maybe I'd gotten the boot too. But then out of the blue, Montrose emailed me and told me that he was performing at the Marin County Fair with Robben Ford. I made plans to go, but events conspired to keep me on my side of the Golden Gate Bridge that night. Fatal mistake. The emails stopped and I realised that was probably a test that I hadn't passed.

Months later *Classic Rock* started nudging me again about getting Ronnie Montrose to talk. I picked up the search again, and they tried to make contact through official channels. After a heartfelt email to Montrose's booking agent, the magazine got a response within days from the guitarist's wife-cum-manager, who agreed to set up an interview. This started another round of emails and appointments made and broken. Until the Sunday before Hallowe'en 2011, when the musician and I finally spoke on the phone.

About five minutes into the conversation he said: "I know you, don't I?"

"I'm not sure I'd say that we know each other," I answered. "But we have met."

"From a long time ago?" he asks, but I'm sure he knows the answer.

"Yes, from a very long time ago," I say simply, not sure if any elaboration would help or hurt.

"Oh, in that case, why don't we meet and do this interview in person," the musician suggested, as if all my requests for an in-person interview had never made it through.

"That would be lovely," I agreed, half-realising I had just made another tactical error. I should have pressed on and insisted that we continue on the phone as previously planned. But I agreed to meet with him at an editing facility owned by a friend of his in downtown San Francisco, where he assured me we could talk without being disturbed.

Convinced that I had finally made a breakthrough, and that the great, in-depth story of how this guitarist had anticipated the future of American rock back in 1973 would finally be told, I began to transcribe the interviews with the other members of the dream team. The composite picture I get of the man is markedly different, equally complicated, but the one thing they all agree on is that he was preternaturally talented. And because of that, despite the psychological ramifications, they all decided to cast their lot with him. And make no mistake, there were ramifications.

"I don't know if Ronnie will ever let you interview him," Sammy Hagar warns me. "You can never forget that he's a mind-tripper. At least I can't."

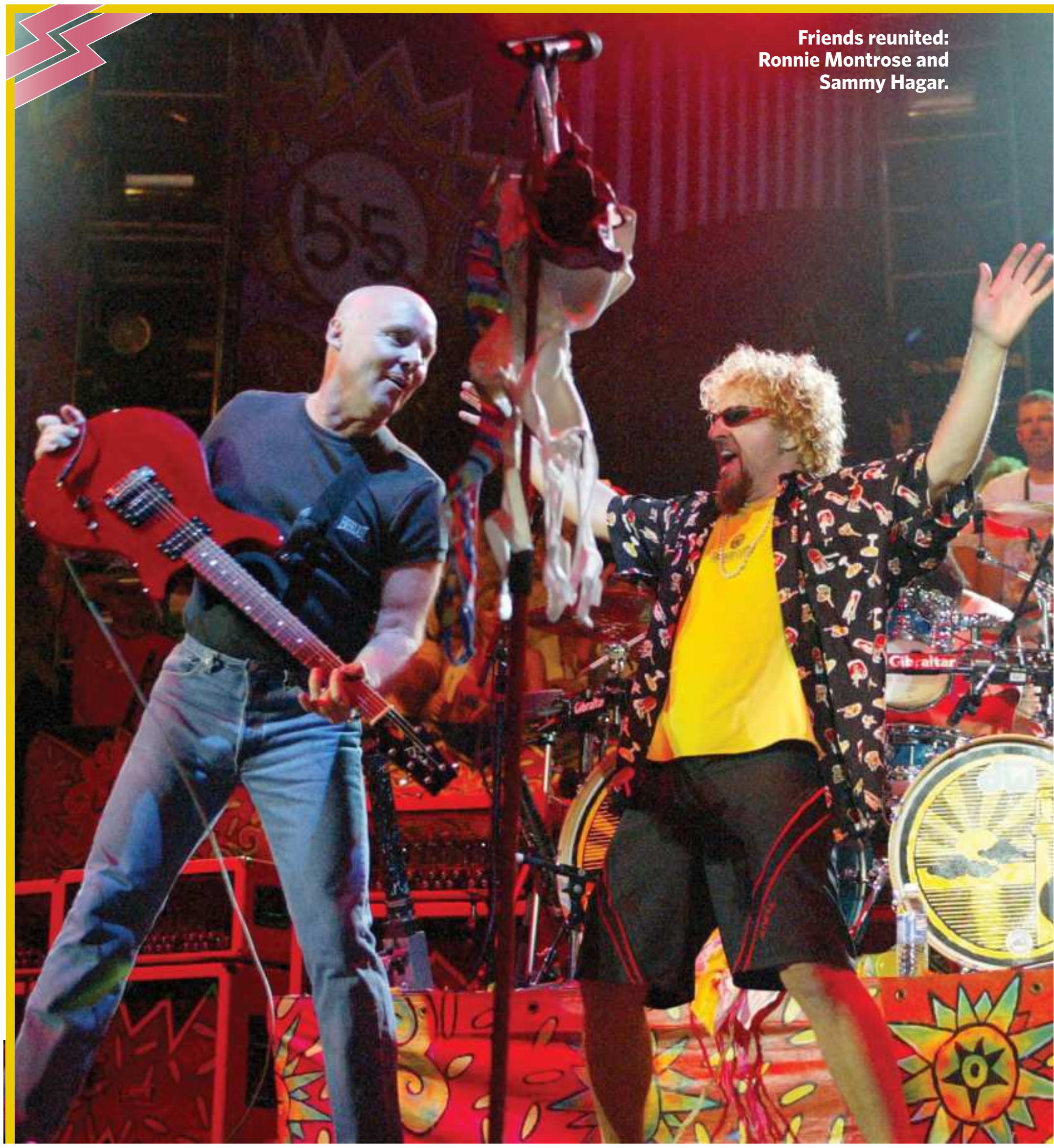
Neither can Bill Church, who was the first person Montrose contacted about forming a band, and the last to finally get hired.

"I think it had something to do with their old ladies," Sammy Hagar confides. "They were friends, but I think Ronnie just wanted to torture him."

Which he did for three weeks. He had his old pal from Sawbuck and *Tupelo Honey* days at the rehearsal place, while he auditioned a string of bassists. "I kept saying, oh, he's cool, man, let's use that guy, when we were looking for bass players," Sammy says. "And Ronnie made Bill Church sit there in the rehearsal studio while he tried out Pete Sears, and Ross Valory who ended up in Journey. He tried out at least five or six bass players right in front of Bill, and every night after the other guy would try out I'd go to Ronnie: 'You know, that guy was cool.' Like Pete Sears was good and I'm going: 'That guy was cool, but Bill Church, man, he's like our buddy, man. He's like cool, he's fun.' Finally he got Bill in the band. But after the first album and tour, he fired him.

"Nobody even asked why, because Ronnie was just becoming quiet. We all feared him because we knew he was wacky and we didn't know who would be next, and nobody wanted to get fired because that was our meal ticket, number one. Number two, we all believed in the band."

Montrose was Sammy Hagar's proving ground. "The biggest lessons I learned was how to perform," he says. "I learned how to go out on tour. I learned how to make a record, I learned how to write songs, and I learned how to deal with a major producer like a Ted Templeman. We had Dee Anthony, one of the biggest managers, so I learned from him. I learned everything but I really learned a lot about playing guitar from Ronnie. He was my first real guitar teacher because he didn't allow me to play guitar in the band so I just watched him every night. And I'd go back to my room and I had my little Les Paul in there. I learned how to play heavy metal guitar from Ronnie Montrose."



Friends reunited: Ronnie Montrose and Sammy Hagar.

"Ronnie killed that band. He fired me. He fired everybody. And finally he fired himself." Sammy Hagar on Montrose

It wasn't to last though, and during the band's European tour Ronnie had decided that the flaxen-haired singer, who people were starting to refer to as "a pint-size Robert Plant", was commandeering too much attention.

Bill Church recalls that things began to unravel between the pair during a meeting about the band's percentages. Out of the blue, Uncle Dee [Dee Anthony] turned to Sammy and said: "Young man, you're going to be a star." Ronnie came unglued. And that, says Church, was the final nail for those two guys.

Hagar remembers it quite differently.

"All of a sudden Ronnie started wearing a white, straight, like a business man's white shirt – long-sleeve with the sleeves rolled up right above his wrist. He started wearing blue jeans and pair of tennis shoes. And I'm going, wow, the dude's looking like a street guy, like a business guy just got off the job, sports coat and tie off, put on some tennis shoes and came on stage. I wasn't digging it. Then he started telling me: 'Hey, man, you're getting too dressed up. I want us to be rough and tough, I want to strip it down'. He just did everything the opposite of what I wanted to do. Finally he told me in London, at Wembley Stadium opening up for Status Quo, not to come any farther than where your microphone stand is on my side. He didn't want me running around stage, so instead of saying 'don't run around on stage,' he just said, 'don't come on my side of the stage'.

"Finally, after enduring so much, I started getting pissed. I said to myself: 'I'm going to kick this guy's ass if he keeps fucking with me.' He was just really trying to keep me down and back and prevent me from shining. Then a week later I got this review in a magazine in Belgium, where we were starting to get real big. It had a picture of me in the newspaper and was giving me a lot of love in the band, 'the new shining star frontman' or some shit. The next day

GETTY

Ronnie fired me in Paris.

"I swear, I'm not exaggerating," continues Hagar. "This is the truth. I was in the backseat, really sick.I ate some mussels in Belgium and I had really bad food poisoning. We pulled up to the Olympia Theatre where we were headlining two nights, and Ronnie turns and leans over the front seat and says: 'After tonight I'm quitting the band. What are you gonna do?'

"I said: 'After I finish puking I'm gonna go starta new band. What the fuck you think I'm gonna do?' I was so angry and that was the last time we saw each other. We didn't even ride on the same airplane home. Denny and myself and [Bill Church's replacement] Alan Fitzgerald said: 'Hey, let's start a new band. You know, fuck him.' We got home and Denny and I started rehearsing some of my songs. But then Ronnie called everybody else up and said, 'Hey, I got a new singer.' So they of course threw in with him because I couldn't offer them anything. I didn't even have a record deal.

"But you know, he did me a favour," Sammy says, drawing the phrase out a little too long. "Actually, I'm so grateful that Montrose did break up because it threw me out into my own and made me do what I've done. If I wouldn't have maybe been thrown out, I could still be in that band. We could be Aerosmith right now. Which wouldn't be a bad thing, just that we'd be unhappy. I'd be an alcoholic, would have been in rehab with drugs over and over again, probably. And probably wouldn't be as rich and famous as I am."

Denny Carmassi isn't as sanguine. "I think Sam would have loved to have stayed with that band. He talks about it to me all the time. We could have been huge, as big as Aerosmith, but it was Ronnie. Just look at his career. Look what he's done. I mean, look how many bands he's had. Look how many opportunities he's had. And each one ends up the same," says Carmassi, taking a breath.

"He's got a history of doing that. There'sa pattern there. He's got this thing about sharing the spotlight with a singer or someone else. At some point he has to realise that he has to. All the great ones have done it. They all have a foil that they feed off of. There's Jagger and Richards, and Steve Tyler and Joe Perry, Neil Young, Stephen Stills. Eddie Van Halen and David Lee Roth. They keep it together. But Ronnie just would walk away from it. I mean he walked away in the middle ofa tour. He did that with [his next band] Gamma. Just before I went to play with Heart. We were right in the middle of a European tour with Foreigner and he called me up about three in the morning. He said: 'I'm going home. So I just want to let you know that everything will be all right. Let the dust settle, but I'm going home.' He's his own worst enemy."

But he remained one of Carmassi's best friends.

"You know something else? Ronnie is brilliant, man. I've played with a lot of guitar players, a lot of guys with big reputations, and Ronnie is as good as anybody I've ever played with. A lot of respects better. He's just got it. I played with Coverdale Page, and Ronnie was right up there with Page. He doesn't take a back seat to anybody."

I cross the bridge to San Francisco on a bright, dazzling day, the kind that makes people want to move here. I find a parking spot, and optimistically put two hours' worth of quarters into the meter. The studio is in a charmingly weathered terracotta building, decorated in the muted colours of a Tuscan sunset. The rugs are expensive, the wood panelling is polished to a burnished glow, and the receptionist is solicitous.

Finally, after about 10 minutes, Ronnie Montrose makes an appearance. He looks very little like he did when I last saw him.

His swagger and demeanour are intact; his posture perfect, but his sculptured shag haircut is gone, replaced by a shaven head. His iridescent cat's eyes are hidden behind blue-tinted glasses and his rail-thin body is filled out to much healthier proportions. Gone are the platforms, bell bottoms and shirts unbuttoned down to there; in their place sturdy but expensive work boots, well-cut jeans and a white tailored shirt, with the sleeves rolled up almost to his elbows.

While his rock star look is gone, the attitude and bearing aren't. While he does evince a kind of tranquillity that you see in someone who has survived a psychic or emotional trauma, there's stilla sense of… I don't know: imperiousness. In his presence you just know that things are going to end up going the way Ronnie Montrose wants, instead of what anyone else wants. That's often true of celebrity.

Despite that undercurrent, I realise – just for my own sanity – that I need to know why he kept standing me up for the past year or so.

"Ronnie was right up there with Jimmy Page. He doesn't take a back seat to anybody."

Denny Carmassi

"You really want to know?" he says, searching my face to see how I'll react.

"I really want to know."

"With your name, I thought you were a Norwegian death metal writer. Those metal guys always try to claim that Montrose is a metal band, when we weren't. So I figured that's what you were up to."

For the record, I am not Norwegian, a man, ora death metal fan. I get the feeling that things aren't going to go exactly the way I want them to. The two of us settle into a windowless room, choosing two ergonomically correct chairs opposite each other. Montrose closes the door and sits down. I start to ask him a question, and he cuts me off.

"As I was driving in I thought: 'I have two stories. I have my life story and my music story.' My life story is something that is so off-the-wall thatI can't share. I mean, I have to be Proust on his deathbed to tell that story. You know, dying and remembering everything that happened to him in his life. That's not what this is about. But my music story is something I thought might be really interesting, to hear everything that happened to me and from my earliest years, which is not something I want to give up."

He trails off, and I get the idea that I am really in trouble here. He isn't really going to let me interview him. Sammy Hagar was right. Ronnie agreed to meet with me, but this is just an audition for an interview. A little like what he did to Bill Church when he asked him to be in Montrose, then kept auditioning other bass players in front of him.

When I asked Bill Church about that, 38 years later he admitted that was true.

"I have to say I just didn't get it. Like I said, Ronnie had called me up and asked if he quit Edgar's band, would I quit Van," says Church. "We hadn't got Montrose together yet. Then here comes Denny and Sammy, and we start writing songs, and then what happens is that Sammy and Ronnie decide they want to write the songs, not me and Denny. So I went back home, and next thing I know here's Ronnie. He's trying out all these other bass players. We're best friends and I have to go with him and sit in Studio Instrument Rentals watching him audition all these other guys."

Did that piss you off?

"Yes, of course it did. For example, my good friends Pete Sears and Ross Valory were auditioning. Andy Fraser of Free was on Ronnie's list – but he didn't even show up for the audition.I remember the night that Pete Sears was there. I got up and started and jamming with Denny. Pete walks up and he says: 'You play better bass thanI do. But let's jam, because I play piano.' We all jammed with Pete on piano and me on bass, and it all felt really stupid to me, with Ronnie's ego walking on the razor's edge. I came very close to just saying: 'I ain't gonna go through this. You go do your little band and I can find something else.' But after almost a month of him auditioning other bass players he finally called me up and says: 'Hey, the time's right.' I know I should say forget it, but all I said: 'Let's do it.' I knew all along that the gig was made for me.

"You probably are wondering whyI suffered all that?" says Church, reading my mind. "Because at that time, Ronnie was the best guitar player in San Francisco. And that was enough for me. It still is."

But it wasn't enough for Montrose to succeed. Or at least past that monumental first album. Unlike so many infamous pairings, the tension between Ronnie Montrose and Sammy Hagar did not fuel creativity; if anything it lowered the tone.

"It detracted big time from the band," Church recalls. "And it made for a weaker second album. Ronnie didn't want Sammy to have all his tunes on the second record. And he iced the cake by trying to sing one of the songs – *We're Going Home*. And he butchers it. Sammy is going: 'Oh boy, I'm the singer, and that's that.' Ted Templeman is probably still having nightmares about the day he let Ronnie sing."

"I don't want to go *Jerry Springer* but like it's the deepest of the deep," says Ronnie. "My story is the real story. My name is Ronnie Montrose. The band is called Montrose, and all these other guys that were in this band are peripherals to the real true story."

"But Sammy Hagar wrote about what happened in his autobiography last year…" I begin.

"I guess compared to Eddie [Van Halen] I got off pretty easy [in Sammy's book]. What I can say, we were like Jagger and Richards. Tyler and Perry. We were a team, and we worked well back then."

And then they didn't.

"But Sammy says…" I persist.

"Only two people know what went on between me and Sam. And I'm one of them," he says, snapping his mouth shut.

I know nothing else on the subject will be forthcoming.

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BEST OF CLASSIC ROCK ★ BEST OF CLASSIC ROCK ★
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LET'S DANCE!

Nirvana drummer-turned-Foo Fighters frontman Dave Grohl has been in not one but two of the world's biggest bands. This is how a punk rock brat became the biggest rock star of the 21st century.

Words: **Dave Everley**

"TAKING THIS SHIT TOO SERIOUSLY CAN BE THE DEATH OF ANY BAND."

DAVE GROHL

DANNY CLINCH/PRESS

Fight club: (l-r) Taylor Hawkins, Dave Grohl, Pat Smear, Chris Shiflett, Nate Mendel, Rami Jaffee.

INSET: GETTY

Dave Grohl has many great memories of Lemmy, but there's one in particular that's imprinted on his brain.

It was late morning in Los Angeles years ago, and the Foo Fighters frontman was en route to The Rainbow, Lemmy's Sunset Strip hangout of choice, for an early-doors meeting with the Motörhead mainman. Halfway there, Grohl got a call: could he come to Lemmy's apartment instead? Sure, said Grohl. After all, he'd never been through those hallowed portals.

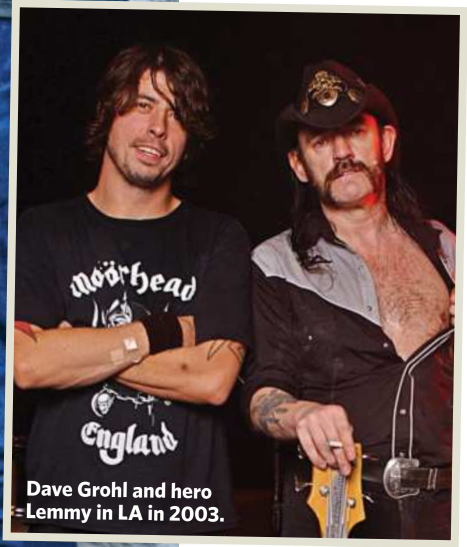
"So I got to the apartment," says Grohl, laughing, "and I was shocked at how fucking disgusting it was. These aisles of magazines and VHS tapes stacked three to four feet high, Lemmy sitting on the couch, in his black bikini underwear with a spiderweb on them, after just dyeing his hair black, doing a phone interview, with a videogame on pause on the television."

Lemmy beckoned for Grohl to take a seat on the sofa next to him as he finished the interview. When it was done, Lemmy asked him if he wanted a drink. "It was fucking eleven-fifteen in the morning," says Grohl. "I said: 'Sure.'"

And there Grohl sat for the next five hours, on Lemmy's couch, knocking back Lemmy-sized measures of Jack Daniel's, with Lemmy in his underpants next to him. They listened to old Dudley Moore tapes and the new Motörhead album, during which the man who wrote and sang it stared into Grohl's eyes and mouthed every lyric as it came through the television speakers. For a bourbon-fuelled Motörhead fan, this was as good as it gets.

"I will never, ever forget every little detail of that day," Grohl says now. "Especially not the black underwear with a spiderweb and a black widow spider right where the dick is."

Jack Daniel's, Motörhead, spiderweb underpants, it's a very Lemmy story. But it's a very Dave Grohl story too. He may lead one of the most successful rock'n'roll bands of the past 25 years, but there'll always be part of him that will forever be that teenage rock'n'roll fan. For all the record sales, the stadium gigs and the A-list names in his phone – and there are a *lot* of those – Dave Grohl is still one of us.



Dave Grohl and hero Lemmy in LA in 2003.

It's 5pm in the UK and 9am in LA when he calls me via Zoom. He's at home, dressed in sweatpants and a T-shirt and nursing a coffee. He's already sorted out breakfast. "I know what it feels like to jump up in front of eighty thousand people and go: 'Come on, motherfuckers!'" he says. "But I also know what it's like to hear my alarm and go downstairs and make scrambled eggs and bacon for my kids."

We're here to talk about the Foo Fighters' yet-to-be-released tenth album, *Medicine At Midnight*, ▷

It ain't half hot, mum… Grohl cools it at London Stadium, June 2018.

(rescheduled for February), and how a livewire punk-rock kid from Virginia ended up becoming a rubber-stamped stadium-straddling superstar. But mostly we're here talk about rock'n'roll.

"Well," Grohl says decisively, "I'm your man for that."

2020 should have been a banner year for the Foo Fighters. As well as the intended release of the new album, it also marked the 25th anniversary of both their self-titled debut and the formation of the Foos as an actual band, as opposed to a one-man project in which Dave Grohl played everything including the kitchen sink.

"Oh god, man, we had a world domination scheme that lasted for eighteen months," he says of the band's pre-covid plans. "It had movies and documentaries and special gigs, and then that all kind of disappeared. We hit pause on everything in March and we all kind of retreated and went our different ways. I had a break for the first time in ten years, which was the most unusual feeling."

"I WANTED TO MAKE A FOO FIGHTERS ALBUM PEOPLE COULD DANCE TO."

DAVE GROHL

Six months after it was originally due to be released, *Medicine At Midnight* is head-butting the cage door, clamouring to be let out. It was recorded in a fast and furious few weeks at the end of 2019, in a big old rented house in Encino, California. Strange things happened there. More than one member of the Foo Fighters thought the property was haunted. "Oh, weird shit definitely happened," says Grohl, although he won't be drawn any further than that.

Most of Foo Fighters' recent albums have had an angle. There's been the half electric/half-acoustic double album (2005's *In Your Honor*), the back-to-basics garage record (2011's excellent *Wasting Light*), the record of the documentary (2015's star-studded *Sonic Highways*), the 'Slayer meets the Beach Boys' mash-up record (2017's *Concrete And Gold*). And *Medicine At Midnight*? If Grohl is to be believed, this is the Foo Fighters' party record.

"I thought rather than overcomplicate things and try to make this riffy prog rock record, which is a type of music we love, let's simplify everything and make the choruses bigger and the grooves fatter and the tempos more up, so people will bounce around for three hours when we eventually get to play it live," he explains. "You know when your parents start getting older and wearing things that they shouldn't wear in public? That might be what the Foo Fighters are doing right now."

He uses the word 'disco' to describe the nine-track album, and that snappy summary broadly fits songs such as quirky lead-off single *Shame, Shame,* with its snapping drum loops, and the defiantly

ROSS HALFIN

CHRIS SHIFLETT

The guitarist/vocalist joined the Foos in '99. And no, he didn't turn down a Guns N' Roses audition to do so.

When Dave Grohl told you that with the new album he wanted to make a Foo Fighters record that got people dancing, what did you think?
Well it's not like we sit down and Dave goes: "I wanna make a dance record." I would love to pretend everything's this big, planned-out thing, but it's not. It's more like he said: "I've been listening to a lot of [Bowie's album] *Let's Dance*, and the feel of that record oozes into what we do."

Was the house in which you recorded the *Medicine At Midnight* album really haunted?
I'm not a big believer in ghost stories, but I will say we recorded it in a spooky old fucked-up house in the Valley, for sure. You'd be walking down a dark pathway at night and it would be like: "What the fuck is that?"

You were in a band called Lost Kittenz in the late eighties. What were they like?
Oh, exactly what it sounded like. We were trying to be Faster Pussycat. I grew up in Santa Barbara, and Hanoi Rocks were one of my favourite bands. I'd visit LA when I was a kid, and it was when Guns N' Roses and Jetboy was bubbling up. That was the moment I went: "Fuck yeah, this shit is for me!"

Is it true that you turned down an audition for Guns N' Roses before joining the Foo Fighters?
That story has been so misunderstood. In 1999, a buddy of mine said to me: "I think I could get you an audition with Guns N' Roses, cos I hear they're auditioning guitar players." And I said: "I heard the Foo Fighters' guitar player just quit. See if you can get me an audition with them." That was when Guns was Axl and a bunch of other people. Believe me, if it was 1987 I would have gone: "Hey guys, I'm over here! Come get me!"

Were you intimidated when you joined the Foos?
Oh, hugely. I was so nervous going into that audition, because I love them so much and I wanted the gig so bad. When I joined, I'd have to tell myself: "Stop staring at Dave on stage." I spent the first few years constantly worried about getting fired. That's what happens when you join a band who are on their third guitar player in three records. Like: "Something keeps going fucking wrong with this position here." Pat Smear jokingly said to me the other day: "Dude, you're still the new guy." And I've been here for twenty-one years!

You've got a great country music podcast, *Walking The Floor*. When did you get properly into country?
The singer in [Shiflett's pre-Foos band] No Use For A Name was really into Uncle Tupelo and Whiskeytown, and he turned me on to that alt.country thing. It struck a chord, and I just dived into classic country. It's so deep you can go off on that forever.

"I WANTED THE GIG SO BAD… I SPENT THE FIRST FEW YEARS CONSTANTLY WORRIED ABOUT GETTING FIRED."

CHRIS SHIFLETT

funky title track. But it's less John Travolta-in-a-white-suit, more *The Game*-era Queen or early-80s Bowie. "Most Bowie purists would tear me to fucking shreds for saying *Let's Dance* is my favourite Bowie record," he says. "But honestly, as a drummer listening to Omar Hakim and Tony Thompson [both of whom played on *Let's Dance*], I'm, like: 'Wow, they really incorporated this heavy funk into a lot of their songs.' Those songs were danceable. I wanted to make a Foo Fighters album people could dance to."

Still, *Medicine At Midnight* doesn't spend too much time showing off its Tony Manero moves before reverting to type. The speedy *No Son Of Mine* nods back to Grohl's punk roots, while *Waiting On A War* and blockbusting closer *Love Dies Young* are arena-ready anthems that share DNA with past Foos megahits *The One* and *All My Life*. It's a livewire record, and a joyous one.

"I mean, come on, that's what we need at the moment, right?" he says. And it's difficult to argue with him.

Dave Grohl grew up in Springfield, Virginia, a short drive away from Washington DC. The US capital was a hothouse for the early-80s punk and hardcore scene, and the teenage Grohl threw himself into it as both a fan and a musician. He felt at home there, surrounded by two or three hundred other misfits in the moshpit of some DC sweatbox or maybe playing on stage with his early band Scream. But while he embraced punk rock, he didn't commit to some of its more exclusionist dogma.

"In the punk scene, there was this anti-hero, fuck-classic-rock'n'roll mentality," he says. "And I understood, culturally and politically, why a lot of those punk-rock musicians disagreed with all that stuff. But at the same time I loved The Beatles and AC/DC. That music had my heart too. I'd go to this sweaty punk rock show, and then I would go ⊳

DANNY CLINCH/PRESS

NATE MENDEL

The Foos' bassist since the beginning is also the singer, songwriter and guitarist with his own band, Lieutenant.

Dave Grohl is pitching *Medicine At Midnight* as a Foo Fighters record you could dance to. As a bassist, that must have been music to your ears.
I was like, yeah, I'm on board. With any band there's always this push-pull between your musical history and trying to do something new and fresh. There's always some element of: "Let's try to do things different this time." That's what we tried to do here.

Was the house you recorded the album in really haunted?
Everybody's got their own definition of what counts as haunted. I'm more of a sceptic. If I see a window slam on its own I'm like, the wind caused it. Or if there's steps in an empty room, I'm, like, it's a raccoon. There's definitely some creepy vibes in the house, but I have to chalk it up to something other than the supernatural.

You've been in the Foo Fighters since Dave put the band together. What was the very first rehearsal like?
We rehearsed in a space we shared with Krist Novoselic's band Sweet 75, this cool loft space in Seattle. What I remember is that Dave was comfortable with a level of sloppiness that I wasn't. Dave's a thousand times better musician than me, but he just doesn't have the patience to rehearse in depth: "Let's go do stuff." And I'm like: "Things sound a little shaky. Are we all playing the same thing there?"

You toured the first Foo Fighters record travelling in a van. Is it true that to mark the twentieth anniversary of the band you were going to do the same thing?
It is. We were going to physically do it in the same van, which we still own, in the same venues on the same dates. We were just going to do exactly the same tour. There were some people in the organisation that were relieved when that idea didn't happen.

Dave and Taylor Hawkins have rock'n'roll in their DNA. Were you the guy hanging out with Lemmy at the Rainbow or speed-dialling Paul Stanley to come play your birthday?
No, I'm the antithesis of the rock'n'roll guy. We recently went through a bunch of old photos of the band, and in a lot of them I'm just sitting in a corner reading a book.

2020 marked your twenty-fifth anniversary as a Foo Fighter. How did you celebrate?
I didn't even really register what date it was, cos we were in the middle of the quarantine thing. We sent each other a sweet little text exchange. That was the best we could do, but it was enough.

"THERE'S ALWAYS SOME ELEMENT OF: 'LET'S TRY TO DO THINGS DIFFERENT THIS TIME.' THAT'S WHAT WE TRIED TO DO HERE."
NATE MENDEL

home and listen to fucking Foghat, and not think it was a crime. [Mock-huffily] 'I think I'm allowed to do both.'"

Still, he carried that punk-rock spirit with him when he schlepped up to Seattle in 1989 to join a second-tier grunge band called Nirvana. Nobody, least of all Dave Grohl, expected them to become the defining rock band of the 90s.

"When I first joined the band it was so much fun," he says. "I lived on the couch in Kurt's living room, we rehearsed in a barn, we set up our gear and played those songs and people bounced around and got hot and sweaty. I really loved the connection and the appreciation that Nirvana's audience had with the band.

"And then there was a period where we started to feel a bit out of place, as the band got bigger and bigger, as we're on television shows and pop radio and magazine covers. It felt a little uncomfortable. But I was also the drummer, so I wasn't the most recognisable person in the band. I could walk in the front door of a Nirvana show and fucking nobody would really hassle me."

I'm sure that's not true.

"It's *almost* true. My existence in that band was so purely simple. And then things got complicated and much darker. A lot of it had to do with drugs, a lot of it had to do with finally getting to a place that felt completely foreign and not entirely healthy. And over time that proved to be hard to escape from. So yes, there were a lot of really beautiful moments and a lot of really devastating moments. It ran the gamut."

Kurt Cobain's suicide in 1994 and the end of Nirvana is well-documented. Since then Grohl has largely steered away from covering his former band's songs. On the handful of occasions that he has, it's always been alongside Nirvana bassist Krist Novoselic and latter-day touring guitarist Pat Smear rather than with the Foo Fighters. Tellingly, Grohl has never sung any of Cobain's songs himself, instead preferring to enlist guest vocalists such as Sonic Youth's Kim Gordon, Annie Clark of St Vincent, and Joan Jett.

"I wouldn't feel comfortable singing a song that Kurt sang," he says. "I feel perfectly at home playing those songs on the drums. And I love playing them with Krist and Pat and another vocalist. I still have dreams that we're in Nirvana, that we're still a band. I still dream there's an empty arena waiting for us to play. But I don't sit down at home and run through *Smells Like Teen Spirit* by myself. It's just a reminder that the person who is responsible for those beautiful songs is no longer with us. It's bittersweet."

DANNY CLINCH/PRESS

PAT SMEAR

The guitarist is on his second stint with the Foos, having rejoined the band in 2005.

Who sends up the Bat Signal when it's time to make a new Foo Fighters record?
Here's what always happens. We'll do a long-ass tour, we'll all be exhausted, we'll say something ridiculous like we'll take a year off. Then a month later Dave will send a text going: "Hey, I've got some riffs and bits and pieces…" And he'll send you a dozen songs. Like: "Oh shit, he's inspired." That's how this one started.

You started out as a member of original LA punk band The Germs in the seventies. What was it like being in the middle of that scene?
What made it so great was that there was no set thing about what punk rock was. You could have a band with two keyboard players and nobody would think: "Wait, this isn't punk rock." If you were an outcast band doing something that nobody wanted anything to do with in the mainstream rock world, then you were punk.

What did you make of Dave the first time you met him?
It was at a dinner. I flew up to Seattle to meet Nirvana. We were at some fancy restaurant, and I'm going: "'I don't have enough money to pay for this shit." And then Krist [Novoselic, bassist] pulls out a Nirvana credit card. I'm like: "What the fuck is that?" They were all really nice and kind, but Dave was the most welcoming of all.

When Nirvana ended after Kurt Cobain's death, did you walk away from music completely?
Yes. That was the second time my good friend and singer died too early because of fucking heroin [Germs singer Darby Crash OD'd in 1980]. I thought: "I don't like this any more. I don't want to do it."

Did Dave have to work hard to persuade you to join the Foos in 1995?
No. We were just hanging out and he said: "Oh, I made this cassette, no big deal, check it out." So I listened to it, and thought: "If he does put a band together, I want in."

You left the Foos in 1997, then came back in 2005. What changed your mind?
I missed them, and I missed playing. Every time they made a new album, Dave would come and play it for me and I would get excited: "It's so good, I wish I was on it." But it took a while to jump back in.

When you're standing in front of eighty thousand people at a festival, does the punk-rock kid in you ever think: "What the hell am I doing here?"
Yes and no. I always wanted to be in a big band, but I didn't want to be the star. My role isn't to be the guy who does the shit, my role is to be the guy who helps the guy who does the shit.

DANNY CLINCH/PRESS; INSET: ROSS HALFIN

"MY ROLE ISN'T TO BE THE GUY WHO DOES THE SHIT, MY ROLE IS TO BE THE GUY WHO HELPS THE GUY WHO DOES THE SHIT."
— PAT SMEAR —

One of the many Foos-related projects that has been sidelined temporarily by the pandemic is a documentary film Grohl has been working on. Titled *What Drives Us*, it's a hymn to the touring life and the romance of rock'n'roll that fuels every band at the very start of their career. As Grohl puts it: "It's about what makes people throw their lives away and jump in an old van with their buddies and no guarantees that there'll ever be any reward other than just playing music with your friends."

Grohl interviewed several of his friends and peers for the film: members of Metallica, Guns N' Roses, AC/DC, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, U2, Black Flag

"Everybody had the same story," he says. "Nobody ever thought: 'I'm gonna take over the world and become a stadium-class rock icon.' They were just like: 'Fuck school, I'm getting in a shitty van with my friends.' All of them, every single fucking one of them."

Grohl has 'got in the van' twice in his career. The first time was in the 80s, a period that began with his stint as the drummer with Scream and ended with the point Nirvana suddenly went supernova. And then, for some weird reason, he did it again when he was getting the Foo Fighters off the ground.

The start of the Foos has been written about almost as much as the end of his previous group: how, in the aftermath of Kurt Cobain's death, he recorded a bunch of songs he'd been writing during his time in Nirvana; how those songs ▷

Those about to rock: Foo Fighters at London Stadium, June 2018.

RAMI JAFFEE

The keyboard player was the last to become a member of the band – after a 14-year probation with them.

You went to the same school that Slash and the Red Hot Chili Peppers went to, Fairfax High. Does every kid who goes there end up in a band?
I was playing the Sunset Strip and all these wacky goth clubs while I was still in school. My first band, Daisy Chamber, were getting demo deals, but nothing panned out. By college I was like: "Fuck this, I've been doing it for six years." During high school it was definitely: "Come on, where's my fucking record deal?!"

You were the last one to join the Foo Fighters, in 2005.
Yeah. And I finally became a full-time member in 2017!

That's quite a long probation period.
Ha! Yeah. But I guess it's all about patience.

Where did you first meet Dave?
I was with The Wallflowers, and it was December 2002 or 2003, and we were in between tours. I went up to DC to spend Christmas with the girl I was dating. It was maybe on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, and she gets a text: "Oh, Dave and Lisa want us to pop over." "Dave and Lisa who?" "Dave and Lisa Grohl." So we got over there, and it's Dave and his sister Lisa and their mother. He put it together who I was as soon as I walked in: "You're Rami Jaffee? I was talking to our management about doing an acoustic record: 'You should get Rami to come in and add keys and classic-rock that shit up'."

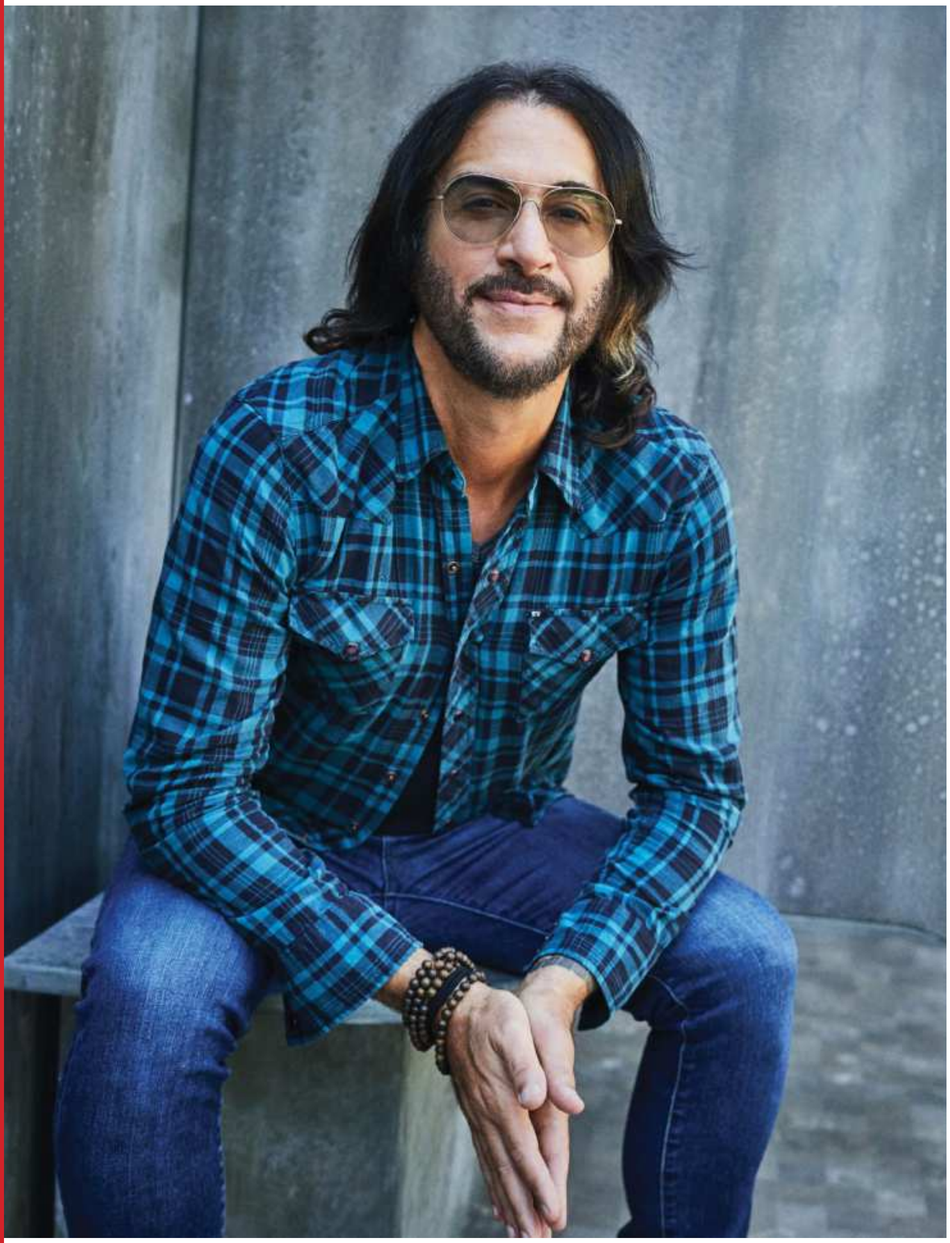
Were you a Nirvana or Foo Fighters fan before you joined?
On one of the first Wallflowers tours, our manager gave us a copy of the Nirvana record [*Nevermind*]. We listened to it in the van. And we're like The Band – organ, piano, some guitars. We listened to that record top to bottom and went: "Oh fuck, this is the time to grow the beard and put on the fucking funny hats." But we loved it. It had some kind of truth.

What was your first gig with the Foos like for you?
I remember walking on stage and hearing this dude in the audience go: "Rami!" Having played Wallflowers shows with five thousand females and two males in the crowd, it's like: "Oh, there's dudes here."

What's Dave Grohl like as a boss.
Oh, he's great. He's like Camp Counsellor, but he has all these crazy ideas. "Let's do a movie in all these cities." Or "Why don't we get Paul Stanley and David Lee Roth to come and play on stage?" There's things where you think: "That just sounds fucking crazy." But it's contagious.

Can you say no to Dave?
[Laughing] You *can* – then you can find yourself another gig.

If I joined the Foo Fighters tomorrow, what survival tip would you give me?
Just plug your nose and dive in. You'll enjoy it.



DANNY CLINCH/PRESS

"YOU *CAN* SAY NO TO DAVE – THEN YOU CAN FIND YOURSELF ANOTHER GIG."
RAMI JAFFEE

became a debut album that was part cathartic exercise, part emotional life raft; how he brought in Pat Smear, Nirvana's touring guitarist and co-founder of original LA punk rockers The Germs, along with bassist Nate Mendel and drummer William Goldsmith (long-since replaced by Taylor Hawkins) to turn this literal solo project into a band.

"When we started the Foo Fighters I was twenty-six years old," he says. "In 1994 I had some sort of personal awakening or revelation or epiphany that life is worth living every single day. The intention of this band was to look forward to life."

The Foo Fighters began their first tour in April 1995. Rather than kick things off with a triumphant, headline-grabbing tour of their own, Grohl opted to open for US underground rock mainstay Mike Watt on a 42-date tour, travelling from city to city in a red splitter van they bought especially for it, earning 750 dollars a day between them.

"It was the toughest itinerary to this day that I've ever had in my entire life," says Grohl. "He'd have eight shows on, one day off, eight shows on, one day off. Sometimes multiple shows on the same day. Sometimes two cities in the same day. When we came home from that tour, everybody had pneumonia, everybody lost fucking thirty pounds."

In that situation, most people in Grohl's shoes would have thought: "Hang on, I used to be the drummer in Nirvana. What the hell am I doing this for?"

"No," he says. "I thought: 'Hang on, I used to be the drummer in Nirvana. That's *exactly* why I should be doing this like this.' Because after that, every fucking tour was a cakewalk.'"

Despite their attempts to keep it low-key and under control, the Foo Fighters' career trajectory hit an upswing pretty fast. While their first album took people by surprise (the drummer from Nirvana can do *this*?), follow-up *There Is Nothing Left To Lose* proved it was no fluke (that album remains one of the best things Grohl has ever been involved in, up to and including Nirvana).

Since then the Foos haven't looked back. There have been bumps in the road, of course. At the start of the millennium they

TAYLOR HAWKINS

It ain't easy replacing a band's original drummer. And also being the drummer in a shit-hot drummer's band.

When Dave pitched this record as the Foos' *Let's Dance*, what did you think?
If anyone wanted to make a pure rock'n'roll record, it would be me. So I was a little hesitant at first. When Dave said: "Let's make a tape loop," I was mortified – I'm a drummer. But then I thought: "Well, that's what Queen did on *The Game*." I was still a little on edge about it: "Is it too modern? Too dancey?" Then my wife heard it and she was like: "No, dude, this is a fucking fun record."

Where did you meet Dave for the first time?
I met him at this [LA radio station] KROQ Christmas show when I was playing with Alanis Morrissette. I was really nervous to go talk to him, cos I thought he was super-cool and I'm a dork. But he saw me walk past and went: "Dude, get over here!" When I first saw them I thought: "I want to be part of that." But I wanted to be part of a hundred bands.

Was it a done deal that you'd get the job after original drummer William Goldsmith left?
When I hung out with them, they seemed like a band, and I thought William would be their drummer for ever. But I guess he couldn't handle it. And there was a time when I almost couldn't handle it. You sit down and you've got Dave Grohl, this amazing musician and amazing drummer, in the control room. He's trying to be nice – and he *is* nice – but he also knows what he wants. I always say recording a drum track for the Foo Fighters takes a week off my life.

You were friends with Rush drummer the late Neil Peart. What was he like?
He was a hundred per cent not like me. He was well-spoken and thoughtful and bookish and a little bit socially awkward. I didn't know him super-well, but I knew him well enough. I was lucky to share some fun moments with him.

Dave famously fell off stage and broke his leg at a gig in Gothenberg in 2015. What do you remember about it?
He just disappeared in front of us. I got up and walked over. I knew he was hurt, but he was laughing so I knew he hadn't broken his neck. He went: "Dude, I think I just broke my fucking leg." But he went into full 'on with the show' mode: "Just play a couple of covers, I'll be right back up." So we did that, and the crowd were cheering us on, but we were like, we don't know if Dave is coming back. Then, sure enough, there he was. It was this weird moment of triumph.

DANNY CLINCH/PRESS; INSET: ROSS HALFIN

came perilously close to ending after a disillusioned Grohl joined Queens Of The Stone Age as drummer on the latter's 2002 album *Songs For The Deaf*. "The seven-year itch," as he calls it today. (There have been other, less existentially threatening side-projects, including the singer's collaboration with Josh Homme and John Paul Jones in Them Crooked Vultures, and his love-letter to underground metal Probot.).

Throughout it all, the Foos haven't just endured, they've got bigger. Songs such as *Learn To Fly, All My Life, Times Like These* and *Best Of You* have become part of the Great American Rock'N'Roll Songbook. Scenes have come and gone – nu metal, garage rock, emo – but the Foo Fighters have endured, a genre of their own.

Asking Dave Grohl why he thinks his band have become rock's modern standard bearers isn't much use. "I think the Foo Fighters have, over the years, become one of the best live bands in the world," is as much as he'll toot his own horn.

Thankfully, other people have done it for him. A papal blessing of sorts came in July 2008, when the Foos headlined two nights at London's 80,000-capacity Wembley Stadium. On the second night, they were joined by Jimmy Page and John Paul Jones for versions of Led Zeppelin's *Rock And Roll* and *Ramble On*. The minute Page and Jones walked out on stage, several things went through Grohl's head.

"The main thing was: 'Don't shit the bed, Dave,'" he says. "Don't fuck up these songs with two guys from one of my favourite bands. There was a moment towards the end of the show where it started to rain and I got really choked up. I thought: 'Here we are, we've survived all this time, having started this band with this demo tape and the old red van, and now we're in a stadium full of people singing every word to every song…'"

"WHEN I FIRST SAW THEM, I THOUGHT: 'I WANT TO BE PART OF THAT.'"
TAYLOR HAWKINS

When asked if the Foo Fighters are as good as Led Zeppelin, he looks like he can't believe he's just been asked the question.

"No."

As good as Kiss?

"[Long pause, possibly diplomatic] Different."

As good as Bon Jovi?

"No," he says, recoiling. "That's asking a lot."

If you're thinking of throwing a birthday party, you could do worse than take a leaf out of Dave Grohl's book. The Foo Fighters played the LA Forum in January 2015, a few days before their frontman turned 46. ▷

Sitting down on the job: Grohl on his specially made 'throne', which he later loaned to Axl Rose.

"We decided to do the show last-minute, and it was like: 'Let's call some of my friends,'" he says.

The friends they called for their celebratory, covers-heavy set included (checks list) Slash, Perry Farrell, Tenacious D, Zakk Wylde, Alice Cooper, Dave Lee Roth and Paul Stanley. "It was literally me going through my phone going: 'Who do I know? Oh, Paul Stanley.' My daughter goes to school with his daughter. I see him every fucking Friday in assembly. We sit there and we talk about pyrotechnics."

It's funny how things turn out sometimes. It's unlikely that Dave Grohl, Foghat-loving punk rock brat, would ever have envisaged one day playing *Rock And Roll All Nite* with Paul Stanley and *Panama* with Dave Lee Roth, or Led Zeppelin songs with Jimmy Page and John Paul Jones, or blasting through the opening of *2112* with members of Rush at the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame, or backing Mick Jagger on *Saturday Night Live*, or getting a surprise call to go and jam with Prince. But that's where Dave Grohl ends up. Repeatedly. Sure, he's living the dream of every rock'n'roll fanboy and girl, but he's also become the modern equivalent of the very people he's rubbing shoulders with – a bona fide A-list rock star, just like Mick Jagger or Diamond Dave. He's one of us, but he's undeniably one of them as well.

There's one more anecdote about Dave Grohl's A-list rock'n'roll connections worth squeezing in, because: a) it's a doozy, and b) it illustrates just how much his peers like and respect him.

Back in 1992, when Grohl was still in Nirvana, there was an almighty backstage bust-up involving Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love on one side and Axl Rose on the other. Names were called, vitriol was spat, portacabins were rocked. It was a real pick-your-side moment.

"We were young and were fucked up and in this bizarre fantasy world of rock'n'roll," he says. "We were fucking kids. And the years went by and we all realised: 'Come on, man, life is too short.'"

Grohl bumped into various members of Guns N' Roses in the ensuing two decades, and even appeared on Slash's debut solo album in 2010. Then in 2017 he got a call from Duff McKagan: "Have you still got the throne?" Duff was talking about the throne of guitars that he'd had made after breaking his leg when he fell off the stage at a gig in Sweden in 2015. Axl had busted his foot during GN'R's reunion show at the Roxy club in LA, and their comeback tour was in jeopardy. Could GN'R borrow the throne? Grohl could have said no. But naturally he said yes. And saved the biggest rock'n'roll tour of the decade.

"So Axl took it out with Guns N' Roses, then he took it out with AC/DC, and then all of a sudden I became the guy you come to if you break a limb on tour, like Thrones R Us."

How did Axl thank him? A box of chocolates? A bunch of flowers?

"He had Slash go pick me a guitar. And he picked me an early-60s Gibson ES 335 Dot, which to this day is the nicest fucking guitar I have ever played in my life. It was an incredibly kind and classy gesture, and I was very appreciative."

The circle was properly closed in June 2018, when the Foo Fighters brought out Axl, Slash and Duff to join the band to play a cover of Guns' *It's So Easy* at a festival in Italy. "Dude, that was the longest, most sustained crowd scream I have ever experienced in my entire life," says Grohl. "It was fucking incredible."

Dave Grohl and Paul Stanley during Grohl's birthday bash at The Forum in Inglewood, California, January 10, 2015.

"I THINK THE FOO FIGHTERS HAVE, OVER THE YEARS, BECOME ONE OF THE BEST LIVE BANDS IN THE WORLD."
DAVE GROHL

You might be reading this and thinking: "Dave Grohl is one lucky bastard." And in many ways he is. But you don't get to be that lucky a bastard without having determination, dedication and big dollop of talent.

If you want to get a sense of the way Grohl really operates, check out *Play*, the 22-minute instrumental solo track he released under his own name in 2018.

"A lot of that had to do with me proving to myself that I could do it," he says. "That was something I had never even attempted – a twenty-three-minute-long song where I had to play the instruments from beginning to end without fucking it up. It was like an obstacle course in my mind. Some kids love playing videogames, some kids love playing football. To me, that's my sport – let me see if I can pull this off. That runs as a thread through my entire career. Let's see if I can actually be the singer of the band. Let's see if we can actually play a fucking festival. Let's see if we can play Wembley Stadium… Every step of the way, I just want to see if we can do it. And once you achieve that, you just push it out the way and go: 'What's next?'"

For all his band's massive success, and the underlying ambition that drives it, Dave Grohl always defaults to his old friend Lemmy in matters of rock'n'roll. And let's face it, there are worse people to have as your spirit guide.

"I always appreciated and respected him as someone who was entirely real," he says of the late Motörhead leader. "There was no bullshit there. He was straight, he was to-the-point. And he had an outlaw glimmer in his eye that showed his sense of humour. And I think it's important in this weird world of playing in a band that your sense of humour stays intact. Taking this shit too seriously can be the death of any band."

GETTY x2; INSET: DANNY CLINCH/PRESS

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